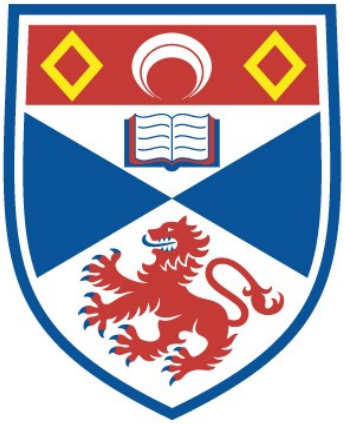
THE DREAM STATE : MAKING, READING AND MARKETING CONTEMPORARY SCOTTISH POETRY

Lilias Fraser

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews



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ABSTRACT

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This thesis investigates aspects of the writing, reading, and marketing of contemporary Scottish poetry, suggesting that readers of contemporary poetry are influenced in their reading by marketplace forces as well as by their early academic training. The thesis attempts to reflect this combination of influences on the reader, but it also seeks to reflect the awareness of these influences in the poets' work.

The Dream State concentrates on factors which condition the reading of contemporary Scottish poetry, and on some of the poetry of seven poets who became established in the 1990s: John Burnside, Robert Crawford, W. N. Herbert, Tracey Herd, Kathleen Jamie, Don Paterson and Robin Robertson. Alert to the political climate of Scottish devolution and to a literary climate which saw the simultaneous appearance of the anthology *Dream State: The New Scottish Poets* and the 1994 New Generation poetry promotion, the thesis examines the pressures of expectation on these Scottish poets writing in English and Scots during the 1990s. The thesis argues that the complexity of their poems and jobs as poets in this period is best understood by 'thinking together' (Steven Connor) the principles of Practical Criticism and publishing history's approach to literature in the marketplace; I draw on research from a combination of critical sources in literary theory and criticism, book history and interviews/correspondence with poets, teachers and the booktrade.

Chapters describing critical narratives which can pre-empt reading – the theoretical spaces of contemporary Scottish poetry, the origins of Practical Criticism, and academic/commercial expectations of the reader – are followed by chapters on the work of these seven poets. Chapter 4 examines longer poems as a reflection of the poets' concerns about personal and national identity, and Chapter 5 discusses the poets' exploration of their social and literary environments. The Conclusion discusses the significance of what I term the museum poem and of anthologies of twentieth-century Scottish poetry, drawing on Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* for an appropriate model of contemporary reading.

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(i) I, Lilias Fraser, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 100,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Works quoted are referred to, according to MHRA guidelines, by a full initial citation followed by the writer's surname and a page number, or by a shortened form of the title and a page number if more than one work by the writer will be quoted.

Frequently-quoted collections of poetry are referred to initially by their full titles and afterwards by the following abbreviations:

ASA	*A Scottish Assembly*
BS	*Black Spiders*
CM	*Cabaret McGonagall*
DD	*Dundee Doldrums*
GGW	*God's Gift to Women*
NHP	*No Hiding Place*
APF	*A Painted Field*
QOS	*The Queen of Sheba*
SM	*Spirit Machines*
TAD	*The Asylum Dance*
TMT	*The Myth of the Twin*
TRTD	*The Testament of the Reverend Thomas Dick*
TWWL	*The Way We Live*

'Surely you are not such a fool,' said I, 'as to believe
that the devil really was in the printing office?'

'Oo, gud bless you sir! saw him myself, gave him a nod,
and good-day. Rather a gentlemanly personage [...]
Has the power of vanishing in one moment though —
rather a suspicious circumstance that.'

James Hogg

This is a Printing Office
Crossroad of Civilization
Refuge of all the arts
against the ravages of time
Armoury of fearless truth
against whispering rumour
Incessant trumpet of trade
From this place words may fly abroad
Not to perish on waves of sound
Not to vary with the writer's hand
But fixed in time having been verified in proof.
Friend, you stand on sacred ground
This is a Printing Office

Beatrice Warde

Introduction

This thesis investigates aspects of the writing, reading, and marketing of contemporary Scottish poetry. It suggests that readers of contemporary poetry, in Scotland as elsewhere, are influenced in their reading, and their choice of what to read, by marketplace forces as well as by the academic skills they have been taught to use in reading poetry. The following chapters attempt to reflect this combination of influences on the reader, but also seek to reflect an awareness of these influences in the work of contemporary poets themselves. My overall intention is to describe facets of the environment in which contemporary Scottish poetry is written and read, so that some of the requirements and effects of the distribution and marketing of books are acknowledged as influential in the act of reading the poems.

The acknowledgement of circumstance is particularly relevant to the reading and criticism of new poetry. Readers are compelled to accumulate knowledge of a contemporary poet's work as it appears, and it may appear in conjunction with information about the poets themselves. Poets' new work is being published and reviewed while readers may still be coming to terms with their previous collections. New poems destined for their next collections appear in newspapers and journals, as do interviews and profiles which reveal, piecemeal, further information about both poet and poems. This extra information may be intended to tie in with the publication of a new collection or, in some cases, a new novel or play; newspapers, particularly, prefer to have a topical reason for spending page space on poetry. Simultaneously, individual poems may reappear in new anthologies, while individual poems or collections by the poet may

be awarded literary prizes. The promotional activities of publishers' poetry lists, literary periodicals or arts funders contribute to the first stages of incorporating a poet's work in the body of texts which are valued, criticised and taught as examples of modern literature; publishers' suggestions to readers are often qualified by terms like 'blurb', 'hype' and 'promotion', but such suggestions can still influence readers and buyers of poetry. Along with these different sources of interpretations, anyone reading new poetry is likely to be attempting to make up his or her own mind; the skills of reading poetry which are taught in schools emphasise how important it is to make up one's own mind about a poem, and to read carefully to avoid undue influence or careless misinterpretation. I do not find this muddle of values particularly undesirable; it is part and parcel of the way poetry circulates. An awareness of it complicates ideas of how readers approach poetry, but such complications can be useful.

This thesis is therefore designed to be as much about what influences the reading, and the writing, of contemporary poetry, as to present the duly influenced readings that I will offer of some of that poetry. In Chapters 1 and 2, I set out some theoretical approaches which help to describe how heterogeneous influences on poetry have too often in the past been divided into the exclusive and competing fields of academic criticism and the materiality of publishing. These chapters look also at the ways in which these influences are being described as occupying the same metaphors of space and value. I read two poems by Scottish poets, one from 1977 by W. S. Graham and one from 1994 by Kathleen Jamie, to show how Scottish poetry has reflected and continues to reflect the expectations of the different indices of critical and commercial value, and how these values change over time.

In Chapter 2 I go on to discuss in further detail the origins of the approach to poetry known as Practical Criticism, still the first theory of reading poetry with which many readers come into contact at school. Though this thesis is not solely about relating Scottish poetry to Practical Criticism, I concentrate on Practical Criticism as an example of how the majority of readers, not least those educated in Scotland, are introduced to easily-digested literary theory. Practical Criticism is used in current teaching practice in, for example, the Scottish secondary education system, where an element of the syllabus which used to be called 'Practical Criticism' has been renamed as 'Textual Analysis' but remains almost identical.[1] Recently-published textbooks as well as older texts on the subject are available to guide school and university students, and their teachers, through the requirements of Practical Criticism. These guides often acknowledge that the method can seem at odds with how students might like to approach poetry, and that it can also seem more friendly towards the examiner of English than towards the student.

The origins of this practice are partly described in I. A. Richards's book *Practical Criticism* (1929). Modern textbooks often make direct reference to Richards's influence on the teaching and examination of English Literature as a subject, every decade or so offering 'merely a re-statement, in easily-understood form, of principles which have been known for many years – since in fact the term 'Practical Criticism' was first introduced', as in John O'Neill's *Practical Criticism* (1969) and its companion text, *Exercises in*

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1 Paper II of the Scottish Certificate of Education's examination for Higher English included a section called 'Practical Criticism' (Part I, Section A). Paper II, Part I of the new Higher Still examination includes a compulsory section called 'Textual Analysis' in place of the old 'Practical Criticism', which still examines students on an unseen poem or prose passage; in fact, in 2000 the Higher Still specimen paper (Model Paper D) was simply a reprint of the questions set for the 1996 'Practical Criticism' paper, so that this examination is Practical Criticism in all but name. See *Higher English 1996-1999: Past Examination Papers* (Edinburgh: Scottish Qualifications Authority, 1999) and *Higher Still: Higher English Model Papers* (Edinburgh: Scottish Qualifications Authority, 2000).

Practical Criticism (1971).[2] An earlier example is James Reeves's *The Critical Sense: Practical Criticism of Prose and Poetry* (1956), introduced as 'a book of practical criticism'.[3] In addition, C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson provided *Modern Poetry: Studies in Practical Criticism* (1963), and its companion *The Practical Criticism of Poetry: A Textbook* (1965), both of which mention I. A. Richards; the authors emphasise that 'the experience of practical criticism should come before the study of literary theory, since the second is, or ought to be, dependent upon the first'.[4] These guides are principally intended as reassurance and example for those who teach or sit Practical Criticism exams. In the 1970s, Roger Harcourt's *Sharing Literature: Practical Criticism for A-Level* (1975) provided a similar sort of reassurance for candidates as Margaret Mathieson's *Teaching Practical Criticism: An Introduction* (1985) provided for their teachers. David Cockburn's *Practical Guide to Textual Analysis* (2001) is intended as preparation and explanation for candidates of the Higher Still Textual Analysis paper, suggesting that the continued practice of examining students on unseen texts is certainly still to be approached in the spirit of I. A. Richards; Cockburn describes the paper's requirements as 'the basis for an entire approach to English', its focus on texts '[revealing] something to you about the nature of human existence' and describes how its skills 'give you a critical insight into the plethora of images, both verbal and visual,

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2 John O'Neill, *Exercises in Practical Criticism* (Glasgow: Gibson, 1971), p.[5].

3 James Reeves, *The Critical Sense: Practical Criticism of Prose and Poetry* (London: Heinemann, 1956), p.v.

4 Charles Brian Cox and Anthony Edward Dyson, *The Practical Criticism of Poetry: A Textbook* (London: Edward Arnold, 1965), p.11. The book contains many Richards-like touches, including transcribed conversations between teacher and students in tutorial settings which bear a close resemblance to Richards's practice of discussing his students' written 'protocols'.

with which we are bombarded daily'.[5]

Moreover, direct references to Richards do not die away over the years, as you might expect of a teaching practice begun in the 1920s; if anything, texts seem to take more pains to explain his importance. During the 1990s, Practical Criticism has appeared in the titles, and as the ideological backbone, of two new student textbooks. In *The Poetry Handbook: A Guide to Reading Poetry for Pleasure and Practical Criticism* (1996), John Lennard provides an updated approach to Practical Criticism as Richards instigated it, but one which is still entirely recognisable and aimed at the 'school and undergraduate students of English who have to sit exams in practical criticism'.[6] John Peck and Martin Coyle begin *Practical Criticism* (1995) with a history of the subject which reinforces its origins in Richards's teaching. They answer the question 'Who Invented Practical Criticism?' with a reminder that its principles are 'so central in literary studies today that it is hard to grasp that it was innovatory in the 1920s', before firmly identifying Richards as 'the central figure in this forging of a new methodology for literary criticism'.[7]

Because, as Peck and Coyle suggest, Richards's influence on reading practice is often taken for granted, I believe it is necessary to examine its origins and its early function in order to realise how it still influences poetry readers today. If we are to understand the whole story of this practice, we need to go back to the beginning and

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5 David Cockburn, *The Practical Guide to Textual Analysis* (Glasgow: Robert Gibson, 2001), pp.3-4.

6 John Lennard, *The Poetry Handbook: A Guide to Reading Poetry for Pleasure and Practical Criticism* (Oxford: OUP, 1996), p.xiii.

7 John Peck and Martin Coyle, *Practical Criticism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), p.3.

examine the inconsistencies of that book itself and the letters, lecture notes and short stories in which Richards commented on his anxieties about his own career. In his book, Richards chose to emphasise the reading of poetry as an activity which should be defended from pressures of the marketplace, as well as from the better-known dehistoricising of each poem. I argue that this choice was a defence against the personal and professional insecurities which he revealed in his private papers, and in some unguarded passages in the book itself. At these moments, Richards shows that he excludes from his new theory of reading practice a certain kind of pressure he experienced himself as a reader – namely, to earn professional standing as a critic in his own university, and in the literary marketplace as a reviewer and published author. I will discuss previously unpublished material from the I. A. Richards Collection in Magdalene College, Cambridge, and will return to examine the text of *Practical Criticism* itself, because it seems to me that in these overlooked moments we can most easily see the pressures and interests that shaped his influential teaching practice. I believe that these moments also reveal that the method of Practical Criticism thrives on anomaly; its inconsistencies may be what have allowed it to exist at the centre of a secondary and tertiary educational system which, in Scotland and beyond, supports a variety of reading methods.

Some of its inconsistencies may stem from Richards' use of a variety of scientific and quasi-scientific justifications for some of the principles laid out in *Practical Criticism;* namely, that a systematic recognition of verbal ambiguity is central to a reading of poetry, that a reader should attempt to approach ambiguity with rigour rather than be engulfed by it and that reading is bound up with a process of value judgements.

In addition, there are implicit acknowledgements that the value judgements of reading include judging the reader, and that in Practical Criticism the reader is inevitably vulnerable. Influenced by his own studies in philosophy and psychology, Richards's work is permeated by a fascination with the systematic analyses employed by colleagues in other disciplines, and a respect for the professional credibility that their subjects were accorded within his university. Richards's study of his student subjects and analysis of their weekly written opinions is treated in *Practical Criticism* as evidence in an experiment, with the methodology described at the beginning, comparisons between the behaviour of readers and the subjects of clinical study, and the students' responses documented in regimented sections.

I suggest in Chapter 2 that Richards was struggling to achieve respectability for the teaching of English Literature as a degree subject mainly because it was felt that literature was a poor cousin to philology, and that it would be impractical to teach and examine it as a subject with sufficient rigour for the students to earn a degree. I also suggest that there may be some visible parallels between the educational philosophy of the American Pragmatists and the 'practical' aspects of teaching and examining English Literature which, perhaps because of the problems associated with Pragmatist models of education, Richards was forced to deny. These problems of Richards's own professional standing meant that there are necessarily limitations and contradictions in the relation of Practical Criticism to the marketplace. Richards struggled, not always successfully, to suppress this connection; Practical Criticism insists that its own system of values is not influenced by the marketplace. Its anomalies remain at the heart of contemporary poetry reading practice, and affect readers' perception, or imperception, of marketplace

influences.

I do not want to reject Practical Criticism in modern reading practice. Indeed, after suggesting ways in which it may (and should) be supplemented and refined, I shall make use of some of its techniques in later chapters. I find its anomalies offer suggestive analogies to the difficulties and unprogrammatic inconsistencies which pervade the reading of contemporary poetry. I am aware that, like any other reader trained in this theory which claims to be the antithesis of competing literary theories, I can never guarantee that my reading could be removed from its influence. The guides to Practical Criticism, such as Cox and Dyson's *Modern Poetry: Studies in Practical Criticism* or Peck and Coyle's *Practical Criticism*, often imply that the subject is not presented as simply a theory to be acknowledged, but is encountered by school pupils and university students as an inevitable basis of learning to read poetry in secondary and sometimes tertiary education. For these reasons, I have offered my readings of poems only after chapters which discuss the some of the academic and commercial expectations of both poets and readers, and I acknowledge that these expectations themselves help to change further the already protean roles of both poet and reader. Readings cannot exist in a vacuum, just as I would argue that writing cannot exist without response to both literary and commercial expectation.

Why discuss these questions in the context of contemporary Scottish poetry? Though Practical Criticism is not a specifically Scottish phenomenon, it is part of the Scottish Qualifications Authority's examination requirements (see n.1), so Scottish readers and writers are likely to encounter it directly. Though its impact may have been modified by other factors, it persists. It persists, though, surrounded by a contemporary

environment in which 'value' is an economic and marketing, not just a literary, term. Scottish contemporary poetry provides an interesting example of a mainly commercial promotion occurring in the same year as an influential anthology; in 1994 there was the conjunction of the London-based New Generation promotion, selecting poetry on the basis of poets' age and publications, with an anthology which is altogether more elusive about its principles of what constitutes Scottish poetry. The milestone first edition of *Dream State: The New Scottish Poets* (1994) implied by its title that to write Scottish poetry during the years in which this generation were becoming established was to write in and about a state of political aspiration, as well as in a condition of imaginative vision.[8] The poems I will discuss, for example those by Don Paterson or W. N. Herbert, can also easily be read in a way that shows a response to the outside influences of critical readings, with one eye always on possible interpretation and on either fulfilling or upsetting the expectations of a trained reader (*'In short, this is where you get off, reader* [...] *Goodbye'*).[9] They can also be shown to demonstrate an acute awareness of what I will call the political – not necessarily an affiliation with any political party, but of the *polis*, about a place within a community, even if it is a dream community in some of the poems.

Practical Criticism is often referred to, in the kind of student guides I have cited, as an ideologically neutral approach to reading poetry, and an approach which students

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8 The anthology first appeared in 1994, edited by Daniel O'Rourke. It has recently been revised and enlarged in a second edition (August 2002), unfortunately too late for me to include a detailed analysis in this thesis. The editor's name appeared on the first edition as 'Daniel O'Rourke' and in the second as 'Donny O'Rourke'; I have referred throughout to 'Daniel O'Rourke' or 'Donny [Daniel] O'Rourke' as appropriate.

9 Don Paterson, 'Nil Nil', *Nil Nil* (London: Faber, 1993), pp.51-53 (p.53).

should master before they examine the less disinterested approaches of particular schools of literary theory. But it is not neutral in its origins or application, because it does not provide an unbiased discussion of the commercial as well as the academic influences on poetry reading and writing. By making reference to Daniel O'Rourke's anthology in my thesis title, I want to reflect the multiplicity of interests (political and creative) which it implies are part of reading, writing and evaluating contemporary Scottish poetry. While in 1994, the title *Dream State* carried a campaigning, political resonance, it also indicated a commitment to the freedom of the imagination. By 2002, when a second edition of this 'essential' anthology of 'New Scottish Poets' appeared, a Scottish Parliament had been established in Edinburgh.[10] In some ways this may seem to have vindicated *Dream State 's* sense of political implications, but (as some of the poets anthologised in *Dream State* have pointed out) changes in Scottish politics have in no way curtailed the poet's need for a 'dream state' of the liberated imagination. These poets are of a generation in which their political environment involves far-reaching Scottish constitutional change and their literary environment includes the scrutiny of readers trained in Practical Criticism, as well as an environment in which anthologies such as *Dream State* and, increasingly for this generation, high-profile commercial requirements like the New Generation promotion form a part of their work as poets.

Helpful in complementing the inheritance of Richards's reading and teaching practice are works which acknowledge the social factors of literary production. Such works are not solely about literary criticism, but provide models for discussing literature

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10 'Essential reading for anyone who wants to come to grips with a new generation of Scottish writers'. Quotation attributed to the *Sunday Times*, reprinted on cover of *Dream State*, ed. by Donny [Daniel] O'Rourke, 2nd edn (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2002).

as part of a particular kind of cultural environment, and I have chosen some of these more widely theoretical writers from a number of possible commentators because their work seemed particularly appropriate to discussions of how values are accorded not only in literary criticism but in the process of commodifying and disseminating literature. Gérard Genette, for example, is primarily interested in how the life of texts differs from the life of the books or other media that contain those texts. He discusses the importance (and occasionally, the threat) of all kinds of literary apparatus. Yet his approach is surprisingly similar to Richards's in its apparent desire to catalogue and quantify what he depicts as a threat to the reader or critic's self-sufficiency. Concerned with wider issues, Pierre Bourdieu insists on the inevitable effect of cultural markets on every individual's taste and judgement, using the wide-ranging surveys he made of French opinion and networks of professional influence; in his studies, poetry is only one form of carefully-handled social artefact like fine art or classical music.

The growing and sometimes sprawling field of book history is open to many theoretical interests, including those of Genette and Bourdieu. Genette in particular is a referent in current book history studies, as is D. F. McKenzie's seminal *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (1986), a work which shows that an emphasis on relating texts to much wider issues of cultural circulation is far from confined to Francophone thought. Although the interests of book historians are in the quantified study of book production and dissemination, they eagerly contest the denial of 'theory' in its more abstract forms; in fact, John Sutherland argued in 1988 that book history is desperate for a theoretical standard to gather round.[11] Recently Bill Bell has warned against treating

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11 See John Sutherland, 'Publishing History: A Hole at the Centre of Literary Sociology', *Critical Inquiry* (Spring 1988), 574-589.

a discipline with such varied theoretical interests as 'a refuge from the bewilderingly rapid change of intellectual fashion, while still retaining professional credibility as "the latest thing"'.[12] Although this multiplicity (or indecision) over cultivating a particular theoretician or school of theory may be seen as failing to present a coherent theoretical front, I find it is more helpfully read as an understanding that no one theoretical template should claim to suffice for studying all the varied circumstances of book production and reading history. Book history at present provides some of the most helpful resources for understanding the influences on the reading and production of contemporary poetry, not least contemporary Scottish poetry, in a wider literary and cultural field. Although Sean O'Brien, David Kennedy and Peter Barry have discussed aspects of contemporary poetry's reception in the UK, little or no work has been done to set contemporary Scottish poetry in the light of these debates.[13] In the first two chapters of this thesis, I am outlining some of the theoretical materials which I see as helpful for the discussion of contemporary Scottish poetry in the context of its production, marketing and reading.

The third chapter of this thesis continues to discuss how the readership of contemporary poetry is perceived through the efforts of publishers and 'bookmen' to identify and increase likely customers. Teachers are not the only ones trying to educate readers of contemporary poetry; according to the anecdotal evidence of bookmen like Geoffrey Faber, Stanley Unwin or, more recently, André Schiffrin, publishers and

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12 Bill Bell, 'English Studies and the Trouble with History', *SHARP News* 11 (2001-2), 1-3 (p.3).

13 See Sean O'Brien, *The Deregulated Muse* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1998); David Kennedy, *New Relations: The Refashioning of British Poetry 1980-1994* (Bridgend: Seren/Poetry Wales Press, 1996); Peter Barry, *Contemporary British Poetry and the City* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

booksellers have a modern tradition of trying to educate their public as much as Richards tried to school his students. In researching this thesis I have interviewed booksellers working in independent bookshops and in national chains, small-press poetry publishers, a distributor, editors and poets to gather additional, and necessarily anecdotal, evidence on how poetry is marketed, distributed and funded, and about the perception of the readership for poetry. In Chapter 3 I also discuss comments from teachers in Scottish secondary schools on how they understand the term Practical Criticism and about their experience of teaching poetry in the classroom. This, too, is necessarily anecdotal. However, finding statistics which relate to contemporary poetry and its readership is difficult mainly because poetry publishing is rarely considered profitable enough to justify the expense of investigation by the booktrade, or educational institutions; where research is carried out, it tends to be based on findings from the UK rather than containing information which relates to Scotland only. The Arts Council of England gave me permission to use *The Poetry Book Market: Trade and Consumer Research*, a UK-wide report prepared solely for the Arts Council's use in 1995 by an independent research company, Book Marketing. It was used as the basis for the Arts Council's policy paper, published after consultation as *The Policy for Poetry of the English Arts Funding System* in 1998. In addition, the Arts Council of England and Iain Stewart Consulting gave me access to a database of readers' responses to the 1994 poetry promotion called New Generation, which included responses from readers living in Scotland and from readers who had bought books by the seven featured Scottish poets.[14] The database has remained, as far as I can establish, unanalysed although the effects that the promotion

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[14] See Chapter 3, n.16 & n.19.

might have set in train were discussed by the Book Marketing report and by the Arts Council's policy paper; sales do not, of course, completely reflect readership opinion. Statistics relevant to the school and university teaching of poetry came from a report by the Council for College and University English for the Quality Assurance Agency, *The English Curriculum: Diversity and Standards* (1997), and from examiners' reports on the performance of Scottish pupils in Practical Criticism, for the years 1993 to 1998, which were made available to me by the Scottish Qualifications Authority. In Chapter 3 I discuss how the different demands on the reader of poetry affect how the act of reading, and being a reader, is defined. I conclude that the definitions of the act of reading poetry are usually formed by academic expectations, but that the identification of the readership for contemporary poetry usually happens through marketplace research.

I have introduced Walter Benjamin in the concluding chapter of this thesis as a forerunner of modern book history for two reasons. The first is because Benjamin's writings are sympathetic to any reader interested in the many pressures and influences on literary projects. For example, inspired by his passionate book collecting, his classic essay 'Unpacking My Library' discusses the confirmation that the materiality of books in a personal library affords its owner. The second reason is to my mind both more important and far less documented, and I deal with it in my concluding chapter. The 'colportage phenomenon of space' is, as far as I can establish, a little-documented part of his huge and fragmentary *Arcades Project* (*Das Passagen-werk,* publ. 1982, transl. 1999), and I suggest in the final chapter that it provides a precursor for the kind of reading which is often excluded from the practical criticism of poetry in which readers are trained. *The Arcades Project* is a study of private and public consumerism in Paris;

in Benjamin's reluctance to end the project, it takes on the appearance of source-book of open-ended fantasies on the nature of urban living. The 'colportage phenomenon of space' is an apparently discarded variant on his definitions of the *flâneur* figure, a comment which combines an awareness of space and value judgements with a physical involvement in the burden of literary selling. Colportage was the activity of figures who were a combination of pedlars and book salesmen, the colporteurs, from the French *col* (neck). These men used to carry pamphlets and books in a pack slung across their shoulders, travelling round rural areas which would not otherwise benefit from publishers' or printers' products. Benjamin comments that it is the '"colportage phenomenon of space"' which is 'the flâneur's basic experience'; '[t]hanks to this phenomenon, everything potentially taking place in this one single room is perceived simultaneously', was his cryptic observation, as he noted a moment of particularly clear vision while standing in an acquaintance's studio.[15] But on further reading, the 'phenomenon' clearly relates to a way of contextualising the response of somebody reading their cultural surroundings, becoming actively involved in the material economy at the same time as they perceive the history of its critical values. Like Bourdieu in his studies of cultural taste or academic networks of influence, Benjamin intended this as a way of quite literally getting a reading on the reader, using the moment in time and the physical location as triangulation points.

Benjamin's reading of readers is appropriate to this thesis for four reasons. Firstly, it is the product of a project that is concerned with how an ostensibly private (or, in Benjamin's reading, bourgeois) space becomes public, retaining an unnerving element

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15 Walter Benjamin, [M1a, 3], *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 1999), p.418.

of the private drawing-room or library in a public space. Secondly, public spaces are treated as collective outlets of fantasy. Here there is no neat equation which resolves the contradictions between private lives and public policies; where private space is revealed here as a metaphor for the anonymous affairs of a city, the awkward disjunctions of the metaphor are nonetheless not smoothed over. Thirdly, public spaces are frequently inscribed with indices of value, and also refer to time as a factor in value. This leeway for fantasy as a valid part of such a time/space economy is unnerving but essential. Finally, *The Arcades Project,* in which the metaphor originates, is largely about the relationship between text and place which is particularly suited to discussing contemporary networks of dissemination and literary projects. The hypertextual organisation of, for example, booksellers' and publishers' webpages, which is of most importance currently to the reader of books because it is a means of selling, ordering and distributing books, is also the method used to organise the full-text databases of texts which act as electronic research tools. Consequently, the idea of hypertext is also increasingly used in academic discussion (sometimes anachronistically) as a metaphor for connections or unexpectedly fruitful juxtapositions of texts. *The Arcades Project*'s metaphor for organising critical approaches to reading provides a more sympathetic logical model than the type of order which Richards tried to impose on readerly responses to poetry, simply because it accepts the odd associations and even contradictory interpretations involved in reading poems.

Yet this kind of metaphor, inclusive and sometimes contingent, therefore allows Richards's contribution to reading poetry to remain valid alongside other methods of reading. The contemporary Scottish poetry I will discuss in this thesis comes after three

chapters discussing the marketplace into which it emerged, and the reading skills and expectations of how to recognise and judge a poem with which at least some of its audience is already, maybe involuntarily, armed before they even pick up one of the books. No reader can guarantee themselves free of an early influence like Practical Criticism – nor is there any reason that they should be compelled to free themselves from it entirely – but I would argue that readings of these poems show that they are written in an environment which expects an audience to bring this training in reading to bear, in addition to being aware of the issues it excludes. Benjamin's 'colportage phenomenon of space' allows the reader of contemporary poetry to be described as more actively involved in critical readings; by being aware of the costs of changing literary judgement and changing literary opinion, these readers are also aware of how they can affect the literary economy themselves. As David Trotter has argued, a core audience can be seen as a popular concept on which poets have often relied, and one which, in the guise of the Common Reader, was under threat from mass education, a threat to literary interpretation which, Richards stated, helped prompt him to develop the teaching method of Practical Criticism.[16] To adopt Benjamin's idea of reading cultural surroundings would take the idea of a core audience which can appreciate the subtleties of form, and suggest that this common reader also appreciates the effects of a literary economy.

Chapters 4 and 5 in this thesis focus most on poems. I have left poems till later in the thesis because it is easy to site a poem, or any other creative writing, as a work of artistic originality which initiates a process of publication, sale, reading and evaluation. However, there is also a sense in which a poem is written as the culmination of this

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16 See David Trotter, *The Making of the Reader: Language and Subjectivity in Modern American, English and Irish Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

process, as well as its initiation. The seven poets whose work I discuss have all in some way been involved with this process. They are a (necessarily personal) selection of the many poets working in the 1980s and 1990s whose poetry seems to respond to expectations of their nationality and gender, as well as expectations of their involvement in literature and criticism. They write in English, some of them write (though not exclusively) in forms of Scots, and none of them writes in Gaelic, but they are invariably identified as Scottish poets by birth, upbringing and affiliation. Chapters 4 and 5 acknowledge the preoccupations of poets writing in a cultural environment which already knows, explicitly, how to read poems. The double bind of having to live up to expectations and, more urgently, trying not simply to fulfil a programmatic list of what the 'good' poem displays may not be a new problem, but for this generation of Scottish poets, as for generations before them, it is constantly made new by a changing literary environment. They have to respond to the state in which they find themselves, and include their response in their vision of the state in which they might rather live and write.

Chapters 4 and 5 therefore deal with some interpretations of what a 'dream state' might mean for some of the contemporary Scottish poets included in the *Dream State* anthology (both editions) and featured in the New Generation promotion of 1994. In Chapter 4 I discuss a set of poems in terms of how they communicate private concerns within a public environment. These poems are often about the curious sensation familiar from Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* of maintaining a private space in a deliberately public context, a dream within the state. The poetry in Chapter 4 draws on the idea of the long poem which, in terms of twentieth-century Scottish poetry, has been discussed

as a national ambition to display competence in all areas of knowledge.[17] This results in a form which is neither short lyric nor long poem; it is more publicly political than a love lyric, and more lovingly intimate in tone than a national manifesto. What we have seen developed over the last decade by younger Scottish poets is a poem which, though not as long as the long poems of, for example, Hugh MacDiarmid or Tom Scott, is often constructed from a collage-like combination of fragments. These contemporary poems demand a reading of the individual's sometimes harried existence between privacy and public duty, between individual establishment as a writer and literary expectations of a national poetry and literary inheritance. Robin Robertson's 'Camera Obscura', Robert Crawford's 'Impossibility' and Tracey Herd's 'No Hiding Place' are all examples of these mid-length poems which are sustained by a vision of knowledge as a deliberate assembly of fragmented pieces. Don Paterson's poems 'The Alexandrian Library' and 'The Alexandrian Library part II: The Return of the Book' are shorter examples of this kind of poem. However, Paterson's collection *God's Gift to Women*, and his translations of Antonio Machado's poems in *The Eyes*, are unusually carefully ordered with particular traits of style and voice to the extent that they are effectively longer poems masquerading as collections. In the case of each of these writers, the longer poems I discussed are informed by, and influence, the rest of their poetry.

The poems discussed in Chapter 5 develop the theme of how poetry moves into public roles. Kathleen Jamie and John Burnside in particular are often read as poets who are not as firmly entrenched in the political as, perhaps, W. N. Herbert. But these three poets' work has been actively concerned, particularly during the 1990s, with what might

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17 See *Chapman*, 'The Scottish Long Poem' special issue, 30 (1981).

be called the dream state. Their earlier poetry is equally about coming to terms with how to establish themselves as writers, and about how to deal with the expectations of them as Scottish poets. Herbert writes about a visionary Dundee, finding his linguistic confidence early on by writing Scotland into existence at the same time as he revived the 'golem' of the city's past. Jamie's early travel out of the country and her departures to create a personal voice display a concern with substituting likeness and artistic imitation for the real thing – either replacing what can be seen in another country with what the traveller might want to see, or mistakenly substituting what sounds like poetry for a true poetic voice. Burnside reads urban space with an awareness of both what might be called reality and the artistic imitations which inform reality. This aspect of his poems is illuminated by comparison with Baudrillard's essay on 'Simulation and Simulacra', suggesting that imitations are not, as Baudrillard suggests, a corruption of reality but a source of the literary energy which fuses the real and the imitation, momentarily creating a vision of a dream state. Burnside's poems visualise the immediacy of the *polis* in the middle of a private and apparently mundane life, and explore the resolution of the guilty dilemma between making art and describing reality. In the work of all the poets I discuss in this thesis, there is an urgent desire to show that however acutely their poems comment on real life, criticise it, celebrate it or act as *agents provocateurs* for social change, there is always a gap between the craft of writing poems which are often test-chambers for social ideas, and the society in which those ideas could be implemented. The gap may sometimes cause these poets guilt or discomfort; but it is just this unshakeable sense of difference between a poem and political legislation which continues to allow these poets to write both critical and aspirational work comparing the real state of post-devolution Scotland with their ideal state.

A feature of this Scottish poetry, particularly during the 1990s, is what I will describe as the 'museum poem'. In this kind of poem, reference to systems of organisation and cataloguing, like a museum's display, is used to demonstrate a heightened awareness of how the modern symbols of a national culture are publicly preserved, and how we might be encouraged to treat them as a resource of information. In a looser sense, it can also be seen in poems where a neoclassical interest is revisited, and forced to demonstrate its relevance to a contemporary Scottish poem, as happens in two poems by Robin Robertson and W. N. Herbert. In my concluding chapter, I discuss how these imaginary scenes of museum display can be shown as an opportunity to see cultural history in a new light, reading the potential of displayed tableaux as Benjamin does when he includes arcades, panoramas and wax museums as 'dream houses', for the mass cultural readership of 'the collective'.[18] Museum poems can also be examples of the arbitrariness and exclusiveness of preserving culture; sometimes these poets criticise the dream house of the museum, as they criticise the dream state of 1990s Scotland, for its failure to reflect the needs of those who look at it as a combination of public promise and private fulfilment. The museum metaphor can be seen in the shape of a real museum like the newly-built Museum of Scotland, which caused much debate about what should be displayed in it to represent Scottish history. The hoardings round the building site were cheered up with specially-commissioned poems, some by the poets discussed in this thesis, which imagined what the museum might contain; contemporary Scottish poetry was suggested as an appropriate way to discover the imaginative and theoretical space of the museum, beside the literal space of the

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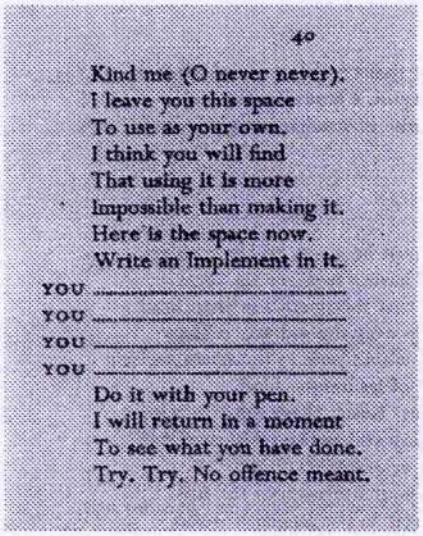
18 *The Arcades Project*, [L1, 1], p.404.

building site. The metaphor of the museum can also be seen in the recent anthologies which represent either surveys of national poetry or small themed elements, in the sense that a collection of texts or songs used to be called a 'museum'. Both deal with the expectations of reflecting cultural history.

These poets have not finished writing. The marketplace they work in, and the nature of their jobs as poets, are not about to settle down. I cannot conclude with a resolution of the tensions that are unearthed in the reading and marketing of poetry. But I can conclude that all one can do is currently describe the process as it is happening, and acknowledge the often surreal conjunctions between literary expectations, theoretical readings and marketplace exigencies. Their conjunction shows up how the unpredictability inherent in reading poetry cannot be smoothed out, as some criticism may try to persuade us. One school of criticism is unlikely to provide all the answers – or if it does provide all the answers, we should remain healthily sceptical of any theory which cannot be shown to be limited by its own parameters. Perhaps the most useful ways of reading are those which can admit their own limitations and co-exist with one another, anomalies and all.

Chapter 1

'Here is the space now': Some Ways of Valuing a Contemporary Poem



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Kind me (O never never).
I leave you this space
To use as your own.
I think you will find
That using it is more
Impossible than making it.
Here is the space now.
Write an Implement in it.
YOU .....
YOU .....
YOU .....
YOU .....
Do it with your pen.
I will return in a moment
To see what you have done.
Try. Try. No offence meant.

W. S. Graham[1]

This chapter looks at some ways in which judgements are inscribed on the space of a page of poetry, and at how real and imaginative spaces are described as another way of measuring the literary value, and sometimes the moral worth, of a poem. Principally, though not exclusively, I am interested in I. A. Richards, and ways in which his methods may be complicated by the later insights of Bourdieu, Genette, and others. When Daniel O'Rourke called his 1994 anthology of new Scottish poetry *Dream State*, the title partly described the latent potential of a Scottish state. It could also describe the latent potential of the poets who were included, treating the page-space devoted to them as a kind of investment in their perceived value; the space of a page is often discussed in more abstract terms, but page-space also represents simply the cost of the size and

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1 W. S. Graham, 'Implements In Their Places' (section 40), *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1979), p.246.

quality of the paper, and its bare spaces reveal not only line-breaks but how much the publisher's generosity, or economy, has allowed a spacious, or cramped, layout of the text. The critical texts I have chosen for discussion in this chapter all help to describe how space is used as a metaphor for both the literary evaluation of a text and as a metaphor for literary values within a state. Yet the *Dream State* anthology, and section 40 of 'Implements in Their Places' by W. S. Graham (reproduced above), are in their own way also descriptions of some of the kinds of space and value involved in a contemporary Scottish poem.

The critical texts I will be discussing also all consider the importance of *when* any literary evaluation is made. Implicitly or explicitly, they recognise that values can change over time, and that the point in time in which a poem is written and the points when different readings of that poem are made will adjust the perceived value of the poem. These texts describe how conflicting values ensure that there is no such thing as a stable index of literary value. This knowledge is suppressed in a text like *Practical Criticism*, where the reader is threatened with the paucity of 'nothing but the bare words before him on the paper' if he or she fails to enrich a poem with an acceptable reading of it.[2] This suppressed instability is in turn made explicit by book history which, however, seeks to counter instability with empirical evidence about the tangible space of the page, like the costs and circumstances of book production. I will discuss in this chapter how this instability is treated by Thomas Docherty, whose readings of different eras of literary value betray a reliance on, as well as a subversion of, Practical Criticism, and by Pierre Bourdieu and Steven Connor whose commentaries on literary value emphasise in

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2 I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1929), p.4.

different ways that the value of a cultural text or object is judged by many different standards.[3]

Most importantly, poems themselves can display knowledge of this instability of value, their writers aware of how conflicting values will be involved in judging a new poem. If a poem explicitly recognises critical practices, it can often seem as if this knowledge is displayed defensively in an attempt to distance the poet from a subset of literary values and show allegiance with the state in which the poet lives, works, shops, pays taxes. Therefore in this chapter I look at two examples of how a modern Scottish poem itself can seem to reject or to embrace the shifting senses of value to which it is subjected. W. S. Graham's poem 'Implements In Their Places' comes from his 1977 collection of the same name. Kathleen Jamie's 'Fountain' was published in *The Queen of Sheba* only seventeen years later. Yet although each of these poets is aware of physical place, of the difference between what they might imagine as their 'dream state' and the places where they live and work, and of the demands made of the poet and the promised literary or financial values they might achieve, they are a world away from each other in their attitudes towards the process of evaluation. Graham exploits or defends the space of his page against the kind of literary reading in which both reader and poet are expected to pass a test. Jamie's poem meets the clash of values head-on, and I read 'Fountain' as an illustration of the arguments put forward by Steven Connor that it is not

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3 The discussion will mainly be based on Thomas Docherty, *After Theory* (Edinburgh: EUP, 1996); Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste,* trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1984; first publ. Paris, 1979) and *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. and intro. by Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1983); and Steven Connor, *Theory and Cultural Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) and 'Between Earth and Air: Value, Culture and Futurity', in *Mapping the Future: Local Cultures, Global Change,* ed. by Jon Bird, Barry Curtis, Tim Putnam, George Robertson and Lisa Tickner (London: Routledge, 1993), pp.229-236.

only possible to accept more than one standard of value but that it is possible to thrive on such an understanding.

I will look first at Section 40 of Graham's poem 'Implements in Their Places', and how it takes issue with the kind of readings which are value judgements on reader as well as poem. It is asking for a reading of some sort, perhaps quite literally in the form of writing or attempted re-writing. Its demand seems to understand the language of contractual obligation, asking for a signature on the dotted line; in this sense, it demonstrates that the reader can become engaged in interpretation. In addition, it demonstrates that the reader may even be compelled to offer an interpretation, and that the poem will then somehow be expected to keep its side of a complex and obliquely-stated bargain. It may simply be providing a space in which the reader can freely express him or herself. Yet the last four lines complicate any concept of free expression; these lines might be apologetic ('No offence meant'), but in framing an apology they suggest that there is something to apologise for. The space that seems to be freely given ('I leave you this space / To use as your own') is soon inscribed with conditions; 'I will return in a moment / to see what you have done'. The authority of an examiner of some kind is implied in these lines, paying its dues to the idea of an eager fellow reader, but also evoking a greater authority by demonstrating both its temporary freedom and the temporary power it can exert. 'Try. Try.'; this voice has the freedom to leave the scene and 'return in a moment', expecting to see some proof of readerly understanding. It implies that abandoning the reader to what Richards described as 'the bare words on the paper' in the long dotted lines could also be the punishment for a poor reading, or an undervalued textual space. The reader has become bound by accepting an inheritance

('I leave you this space') on terms which he or she cannot fully understand on first initiation. In an early reading, it is all too clear that using and understanding the space of the poem 'is more / Impossible than making it', but that some kind of answer is expected and, however gingerly assessed and guiltily demanded, will be accorded value.

'Here is the space now' not only calls this unorthodox recognition of space into existence, it also emphasises how the rest of the poem's experimental mood may be chafed by the doubts and demands of a system of reading and evaluating poetry, which may, to the poet, have seemed outmoded. In a reading of this section of the poem, along with sections 10 and 57, Tony Lopez noted the recognition of strained relationships and expectations between the acts of writing and of critical reading, and warns that:

> Our notion of re-constructing a fragmented self from the dislocated narrative bits [...] is given an old-fashioned look. The distance between the reader and the writer is not reduced but increased. Things seem to have been hauled into the poem while we were not looking.[4]

Lopez himself is taking a classically old-fashioned look at the poem. He attributes his impression of the poem's deliberate attempt to face down critical principles to Graham's 'punning and word substitution', very much as Richards placed emphasis in Practical Criticism on the importance which should be attached to ambiguity by both reader and poet. A particular critical story has, for better or worse, already started to direct Lopez's reading before he approaches the poem. One critical account can pre-empt other readings. Yet it does not fully attempt to account for the sense that 'things seem' to be

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4 Tony Lopez, *The Poetry of W. S. Graham* (Edinburgh: EUP, 1989), p.103.

independent of this one reader's interpretation.

That one critical approach might not reveal all the possible interpretations of a poem is corroborated by Thomas Docherty in *After Theory*. Although his readings, too, rely on the strict organisation of ambiguity important to Practical Criticism, he also argues that a poem can offer readings of the imagined spaces in which it is situated, as a reader might also read the way that the poem presents that imaginative territory. Docherty's argument is that such a poem can be read as if it presents itself, knowingly, as a symptom of critical disease. Like the retelling of a dream presented for the analyst's consideration, features of the poem could be shown to betray a conscious awareness of critical pressures. Like an analysand, the poem may also present further symptoms to the analyst without being consciously aware of it. Some of the space of such a poem is dreamed up with the aid of the writer's knowledge but some, Docherty argues, is therefore ambivalent in a way which may not be consciously intended. He warns that in order to investigate the poem the reader will become 'an epistemological sleuth', hunting for a reality which must somehow ground the text, but which is securely locked away from all but the persistent and intelligent.[5] Interpreting the poem becomes a duel between poem and epistemology; Docherty uses the example of Oedipus negotiating the questions of the Sphinx to enter his city. Just as the Sphinx's whole purpose ceases with a successful answer to her own question, Oedipus's constant questioning principally reveals not truth about himself, even an unpalatable truth, but an overwhelming instability of identity. If a close reading of the poem actually provides all the answers to how the poem can be understood, then Docherty's choice of analogy implies that the reading will

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5 Docherty, p.43.

similarly collapse under the weight of its own inevitable contradictions. He suggests that both the poet reading his or her own imagination, and the critic reading the poet's work, can be subconsciously persuaded 'criminally to fix the evidence', manipulating the space of the poem to fit what they expect the analysis to uncover. He explains that:

> This is a problem, however, if and only if the aim of interpretation is purely epistemological, only if the interpreter aims to reveal the truth of the text, its geo-polis of light behind its opaque gated surface.[6]

Yet Docherty's alternative is the serious game of postmodernism which, rather than insisting singlemindedly on destructive revelation, 'releases poetry into its full comic, parodic obscurity', an obscurity in which there is no such thing as even a common dream of an illuminating city.[7] It does not seem as if the poems which I will examine in later chapters are willing to give up a dream of the common space, although perhaps some have given up believing that the city could be reconfirmed by common interpretation. However, Docherty's postmodern critical implements are helpful tools for discussing, as he does, the space that poetry has inherited from Richards's methods.

As I will discuss now and in the next chapter, there is evidence that Richards seems to have felt foreboding that future generations would provide transgressive readings of the critical space he had institutionalised, scrutinising him and his methods of examination in their turn. In addition, even when he was becoming established as a university teacher he seems to have dreaded the pitfalls of the unknown text. The basis,

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6 Docherty, p.50.

7 Docherty, p.72.

or ground, for his arguments becomes inhabited by contradictions and challenges to his view of interpretation. In one of his unpublished notebooks, a fragment of particularly apprehensive short story describes a young writer trapped into making a judgement in front of his literary seniors on 'a little anonymous book of verse'. His questioner, an overtly seductive woman, at first distracts him from conversations with the other literary professionals at the table with 'significant' looks and smiles. When she asks him for an opinion of the book he is lulled into feeling 'on solid ground again', rather than embroiled in 'advantageous' professional conversations:

> I was about to speak when I noticed the quality of the general silence. It caught my breath away by sympathy.
>
> I had to temporise.
>
> 'Well what do *you* think of it?' I asked.
>
> 'I? I only want to know what I ought to think. Im [sic] not a clever critic. Im [sic] only one of the poor public you know. Come now what ought I to think of it.
>
> I shouldn't have supposed she could be so reductive.[8]

The critic gives a dismissive opinion and then discovers that his sphinxish questioner is the poet herself, an invaluable piece of information which the others present already knew. The story is unfinished, but the remainder deals with the speaker's humiliation and fear of what the onlookers think of him. Written around 1922, the story seems to me to be a clear fable predicting the possible professional and personal consequences of writing

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8 'A Reparation', Magdalene College Library, I. A. Richards Collection, Notebook 24 [1922].

Practical Criticism. The typical critic in *Practical Criticism* is also inevitably challenged, often seemingly out of nowhere and by an overlooked nobody, in the very space that he has begun to establish as his own, and subject to what the protagonist in this story calls 'scrutiny'.[9] Although the critic in the story is tempted by a desire to 'solve the secret' and discover the 'singularity' of what he examines, his narrative is the apprehension of what will face him in his field of study.[10] In the Introduction to *Practical Criticism*, Richards describes the book as 'the record of a piece of field-work in comparative ideology'.[11] For readers today the sense of the 'field' has grown more complicated and Richards's 'field-work' needs to be supplemented by the kind of 'field-work' developed in the later twentieth century by such sociological scholars as Pierre Bourdieu.

Bourdieu's field-work also defines the fields of cultural production in which an observer like Richards is implicitly mired as he struggles for a detached critical approach. It is worthwhile at this point appreciating just how an understanding of Bourdieu's work will illuminate but clarify the work of Richards. Bourdieu principally emphasises that the evaluation of something in the cultural field is prompted by a vital, if often tacit, understanding of capital, and that the principle of the uses of capital is translated from the economic to the literary or artistic with a far greater ease than is often welcomed. His field-work includes *Distinction* (publ. 1979, trans. 1984), in which he used wide-ranging sociological investigation in France to prove that 'taste' is not innate but learned,

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9 'A Reparation', Notebook 24.

10 'A Reparation', Notebook 24.

11 *Practical Criticism*, p.6.

and *Homo Academicus* (publ. 1984, trans. 1988), in which he explored the different webs of connections within French academia; both books argued that the people or institutions often perceived as objective and disinterested judges of art or literature are in fact as reliant on systems of exchange and networks of professional relationships as people involved in any other form of economic field. The resonant phrase he uses in *Distinction*, 'taste classifies and it classifies the classifier', is a recurrent reminder that there can be no such thing as an objective value judgement within the field of literary production.[12] He defines the 'field of cultural production' as 'the space of literary or artistic position-takings', where position-taking is the constantly evolving movement of agents like critics, writers, reviewers or academics; it is their webs of changing relationships which actually maintain the field and which influence the perceived value of the artistic objects they judge.[13] 'Field' uses the varying ideological distances between agents to set out its parameters, but it also relies on the notion of an absolute space and a strong sense of history; former positions and relationships are as important as current. Bourdieu described four concepts which are relevant to a discussion of how poetry is read and valued in contemporary culture: the workings of cultural capital, the effect of time and of 'consecration' on cultural values and on evaluators, the competition of 'sub-fields' in literary interests, and the idea that *habitus* dictates taste and complicates literary evaluation.[14]

Within the field of literary production, Bourdieu compares two sub-fields. The

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12 *Distinction*, p.6.

13 *The Field of Cultural Production*, p.30.

14 See particularly 'The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed' in *The Field of Cultural Production*, pp.[29]-73.

field of large-scale production is directly influenced by economic motives, while in the field of restricted production agents play for cultural rather than economic capital.[15] In the field of restricted production, the importance of financial capital is inverted, so that if a piece of work or an individual becomes economically successful, measured by the success of large-scale production, they simultaneously lose symbolic capital in the field of restricted production. The less contact agents have with anything outside their field, the more secure they are within that field. Finally, symbolic (or cultural) capital is defined by Bourdieu, as Randal Johnson explains, as 'a degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity, consecration or honour [...] founded on a dialectic of knowledge and recognition' which relies on 'forms of cultural knowledge, competences or dispositions'; for instance, although an academic degree can represent cultural capital and can thus be translated into economic capital through improved job prospects and higher salaries, it actually signifies a relatively discrete economic system.[16] As I. A. Richards's short story showed, cultural capital can be as essential to a critic as financial capital.

Bourdieu argues that the sub-field of restricted production operates a strict economic system which inverts the significance of cultural capital and economic capital in the field of production as a whole. He further expands on the struggle between the two sorts of hierarchisation within the field of cultural production; the 'heteronomous principle, favourable to those who dominate the field economically', in which the work produced should permeate beyond the consideration of the sub-field which produces it, is in opposition to the reflexive 'autonomous principle' – '"art for art's sake"' –

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15 See editor's introduction to *The Field of Cultural Production*, pp.1-25 (p.15).

16 *The Field of Cultural Production*, p.7.

identified 'with a degree of independence from the economy', in which 'temporal failure' is seen as 'a sign of election and success as a sign of compromise'.[17] Within the literary field the principal form of power is that of 'consecration', a sometimes reflexive perpetuation of power and transmission of values (for example, the quotation on book jackets of praise from peers or better-established writers). Temporal hierarchy also exists in the process of consecration, since some of the agents are separated by time:

> the emergence of a group capable of 'making an epoch' by imposing a new, advanced position is accompanied by a displacement of the structure of temporally hierarchized positions opposed within a given field; each of them moves a step down the temporal hierarchy which is at the same time a social hierarchy.[18]

The act of consecration is therefore only valid at the point in time in which it is made; the point when an established writer or critic performs what Bourdieu describes as the 'acts of prophetic denunciation' which 'have become so intrinsic to the personage of the intellectual that anyone who aspires to a position (especially a dominant one) in the intellectual field has to perform such exemplary acts'.[19]

I. A. Richards was aware that he, like any other critic, must perform these acts in order to establish himself in his field, however much he felt disquiet about how clearly his critical work was bound up with his status as an academic; he was himself part of a displacement of a previous type of critic and critical reading and was very unsettled by the insecurity of being subjected to a similar displacement by others in his turn. His

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17 *The Field of Cultural Production*, p.40.

18 *The Field of Cultural Production*, p.60.

19 *The Field of Cultural Production*, p.63.

awareness of the precision of timing in these acts of 'prophetic' denunciation also suggests a preliminary, if reluctant, awareness that interpretation does not create a timeless space, and (as Chapter 2 will indicate) the writing of *Practical Criticism* seems to betray almost unintentional sympathy for the pressures on critics and poets.

Bourdieu's field-work is opposed to the detachment of literary judgement for which Richards strove. Bourdieu is insistent that it is simply the history of the reader's cultural geography, his or her *habitus*, which sanctions any one reading to pre-empt any others in the field:

> The 'pure' gaze is a historical invention linked to the emergence of an autonomous field of artistic production, that is, a field capable of imposing its own norms on both the production and the consumption of its products.[20]

A reader's first reading of a work can therefore never be freed of the influences of the reader's history and background; Bourdieu argues that only for a reader blinkered by the perspective of restricted production is it possible to believe in 'the "pure" gaze'. He links this repeatedly to the economic circumstances of the reader, arguing that the pure gaze is the product of 'a general disposition towards the world which is the paradoxical product of conditioning by negative economic necessities – a life of ease – that tends to induce an active distance from necessity'.[21] Some of the Scottish poems I will read in later chapters are particularly preoccupied with ways of looking at literal spaces which are very close to economic necessity, like arcades and city centres. An indication of the

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20 *Distinction*, p.3.

21 *Distinction*, p.5.

modern equivalent of 'pure gaze', in these contemporary Scottish poems, is a constantly changing *habitus*. The poems often invoke figures who, regardless of how much they acknowledge explicitly that *habitus* forms their reactions, literally move through an economic centre, like the flâneur figure who features in Benjamin's own field-work on the Paris arcades.

Yet these poems do not forget that for every centre of value there are forgotten, devalued or marginalised areas. Gérard Genette describes how these marginalised areas of economic value are treated in his book *Paratexts* (1987, transl. 1997). The idea of paratext brings into relief the critical metaphors of text as physical space, or a form of real estate. He shows how every text is surrounded – spatially and temporally – by what he calls *paratext,* and the term covers elements from the amendments of various editions of the text to the blurb of the bookjacket to relevant entries in the author's diary. It necessarily includes the kind of comment that Bourdieu would describe as 'consecration'; paratext incorporates all the accumulated evaluations and changes which would not be in existence without the initial existence of the text. For example, there are spatial elements like the *peritext*, which is material which surrounds the text but is presented as part of the publication as a whole. There are also elements like the *epitext*, the messages about the book 'located outside of the book, generally with the help of the media or under cover of private communications', which together 'share the spatial field of the paratext'.[22] Examining a text's paratext is a way of seeing history in terms of the space of a text, and it acknowledges the history of the text's gradual positioning in the field. Paratext forms our perception of the text and allows us to receive the text in practical

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22 Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: CUP, 1997; first publ. Paris, 1987), p.5.

form; '[t]he paratext is what enables a text to become a book'.[23] In effect, *Paratexts* is a meticulous description of the book form as a miniature version of Bourdieu's literary sub-fields, in which each variety of paratextual element is identified and shown to be a shaper of value. Importantly, in Genette's view the text's author is a constant referent and source of purpose for the text's history, and the paratext is subservient to authorial intention.

However, although he is reluctant to accord the paratext as much power as the text it surrounds, Genette sees power, or threat, in the paratext's marginal spaces. It is the paratext which both protects and controls the text, constantly adapting and sustaining the text and, implicitly, its author's reputation for survival in different periods. More importantly, it is the paratext which proves the existence of the text in actual form; although text and paratext can be perceived as separate entities it is impossible, by Genette's definition, to demonstrate the separation, any more than it would be possible to demonstrate that reading can be unprejudiced by the reader's *habitus*. The text occupies the central space of the field, and the paratext an altogether less controllable marginal state, a kind of corridor between the two contentious fields which shape literary production:

> More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a *threshold*, or [...] a 'vestibule' that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back. It is an 'undefined zone' between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world's discourse about the text) [...] a zone between text and

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23 *Paratexts*, p.1.

off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction.[24]

Genette emphasises throughout the book the importance of the paratext as a way into (or out of) the more rarified atmosphere of ideal textual encounter; 'the paratext provides a kind of canal lock between the ideal and relatively immutable identity of the text and the empirical (sociohistorical) reality of the text's public [...] the lock permitting the two to remain level', 'an airlock that helps the reader pass without too much respiratory difficulty from one world to the other', 'an instrument of adaptation', but an unstable area of the margin for critical attention, prompting the 'simple slogan: *watch out for the paratext*!'.[25] Throughout its attempts to control the value of the paratext, Genette's critical narrative suspects that there is a constant and threatening unrealised potential to be dredged up from the spaces of a text's material form.

This unrealised potential is what the rapidly-growing discipline of book history attempts to discover. Although book history is interested, and sometimes preoccupied by, the relevance of literary theory's values to the material history of the book, its areas of study also earn sympathy from sources which do not always indulge theoretical abstraction for its own sake. In a 1997 editorial for *P. N. Review*, Michael Schmidt protested that pressure groups in some countries were preventing multi-national publishers from distributing certain books to bookshops. This not only had an impact on the books supplied to the countries in question, but could force changes on whole print runs of books destined for more than one country by a multi-national publisher. He argued that as long as criticism remained blind to these marginal, but far-reaching,

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24 *Paratexts*, pp.1-2.

25 *Paratexts*, p.410 and pp.407-408.

pressures such censorship remained uncontrollable:

> It is time to evolve a new critical discipline which considers not the death of the author, the instability of the text, or the unfolding fascinations of theory in relation to language, but concentrates its attention on the editorial and manufacturing history of publishing, monitoring the progress of texts through the various mangles and filters that bring them, at last, to the library shelf, the bookshop or the electronic media.[26]

He envisaged a gradual process of 'revealing' how 'the industry that gives us books regards and treats its writers as producers, us as readers, and the world market as a censoring factor', concluding that:

> Such a discipline is pre-textural [*sic*] and will help define cultural moments and the ever-shifting boundaries of our freedom as authors and readers.[27]

In other words, a book's author-centred paratext should be should noted but the circumstances of its production should be acknowledged as pre-empting even a paratextual reading. This does perhaps only happen, as Schmidt implies, in reaction against curtailed distribution, like the protests over the decision by Oxford University Press in 1998 to discontinue its contemporary poetry list. By 1997, the discipline of book history was of course concentrating 'on the editorial and manufacturing history of publishing'. This demand for a 'pre-textual' approach, though, had been voiced by a journal like *P. N. Review*, which relies heavily in its poetry reviewing on approaches to poetry reading based on principles of close reading.

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26 Michael Schmidt, Editorial, *P.N. Review*, 24 (1997), 1 (p.1).

27 Schmidt, p.1.

Book history's awareness of how theoretical values coincide with the economics of writing, publishing and distribution means that it frequently examines a wide range of theories. This causes problems for book historians, but it also sanctions multiple theoretical indices of value. In 1985, Donald McKenzie gave a series of lectures, published as *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (1986), which became one of the founding texts of what is still considered a relatively new and growing field. He argued that the attitude towards texts valued by Richards's methods was stability of judgement, but not a fixity of material form. To a book historian's sensibilities, such a method was the result of pressure to crystalise a sense of common value:

> the critical analysis of set texts was an efficient way to teach reading from what was irreducibly common to a class, the text itself laid out on the page in a kind of lapidary state.[28]

As I will discuss particularly in Chapters 4 and 5, poets are exercised by the expectation that readers will both understand the potential value in the boundaries of the page and be aware of its shortcomings. McKenzie also argued that, in 'an attempt to give it some kind of objective or "scientific" status', conventional bibliography was also guilty of blindness towards 'interpretive structures' which 'obscured the role of human agents', in parallel with the way that readers have often been trained to treat '"the poem-on-the-page" as a self-contained verbal structure'.[29]

Similarly, in 1990 Robert Darnton described his approach to the history of books

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28 D. F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts*, The Panizzi Lectures (London: British Library, 1986), p.19.

29 McKenzie, p.8.

as part of a project which would reach beyond the boundaries of professional specialisation, 'monographism', and keep in play the critical values of different eras. He considered that it was not enough to rewrite the history of the printed medium, 'to rewrite history as present politics', but that the scholarship should reach into its 'historical daydreams' for a defining moment or circumstance that could allow any reader to realise the potential past, as the equivalent of the kiss that breaks into a dream.[30] In his view, the only way to realise a dream state in literature is to be aware of this cultural history of literature's various media. In the poetry I discuss in this thesis, there is often a similar desire for a poem to become such a defining moment, realising the past while acknowledging the shock of the present; as I will discuss shortly, Kathleen Jamie's poem 'Fountain' is an obvious example.

Darnton had written admiringly of McKenzie's earlier work in a 1982 essay, 'What is Book History?', when he also identified the practicalities of distribution as something that should be studied in itself and acknowledged by critics as part of their approach to a text.[31] As John Sutherland later noted, there are practical problems to such comprehensive scholarship when sometimes critics simply do not have the necessary expert knowledge of production and distribution; for example, even Darnton's model which I will discuss in Chapter 3 is based on his area of expertise in the eighteenth-century French booktrade. However, perhaps the defining characteristic of book history as a distinct field is a desire to reinject the study of print publishing and distribution with the enthusiasm of the bibliophiles who felt their books possessed human presence, and

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30 Robert Darnton, 'Introduction', *The Kiss of Lamourette* (London: Faber, 1990), pp.xi-xxi.

31 See Robert Darnton, 'What Is Book History?', *The Kiss of Lamourette*, pp.107-135 (first publ. in *Daedalus*, Summer 1982, 65-83).

who treated books as they would lovers.[32] Book history allows the critic to acknowledge that texts are inevitably subjected to more than one critical value, and also to acknowledge that those texts are firmly sited in an economically motivated marketplace and should also be judged with an awareness of economic forces.

What implications does this have for the contemporary poet who is aware of, or at least subjected to, all these economic and critical pressures? I want to look now at Steven Connor's *Theory and Cultural Value* as a summary of how these multiple systems of value are becoming accepted, and discuss Kathleen Jamie's 'Fountain' as a reading of contemporary culture which easily parallels his discussion of the effect of time on value judgements and on economic value. Connor at first bases his critique of evaluation on a deceptively simple premise. He argues that it seems as if one can only accept a 'traditionally polarized' struggle between any description of value which recognises only an absolute set of values, and a system open to relative value. In this struggle, any resulting 'inconsistency and aporia' revealed by the comparison of the two systems is mistrusted and subject to forcible resolution. But Connor insists that absolute and relative value must instead be 'thought together, rather than resolved, either in favour of one or other alternative, or in favour of some imagined synthesis of the two'.[33] He advocates willingness to accept the contradiction between the two forms of value system, depicting, as Bourdieu does, a field whose boundaries only remain relatively

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32 Megan Benton discusses the culture of private collectors' bookbinding and bookplates in terms of how 18th and 19th century bibliophiles invested their feelings for books with the same significance as relationships with people (particularly finding similarities between how the male-dominated world of book collecting tried to maintain the changing balance of power in relationships between men and women) in '"Better Than a Mistress": Gender and the Cultural Erotics of Modern Book Love', conference paper, *Material Cultures: The Book, the Text and the Archive*, Edinburgh, 28-30 July 2000.

33 *Theory and Cultural Value*, p.2.

constant because of continual struggle between polarised forces. The glue which holds this field together in its continually insoluble state is 'the necessity, or value, of value itself' – in other words, the field contains not so much inherent value or opposing values but value as a kinetic force.[34] This continuing necessity, which Connor calls 'the imperative to value', must by definition oppose concrete values, and force constant and naturally self-reflexive re-evaluation of them:

> the values that we prize come into being because of acts of energetic, painful appraisal; values are the sedimental deposits of the imperative to value.[35]

He considers a general critical gravitation towards interpretation and away from evaluation, and contemplates the institutionalisation of evaluation which has centred the responsibility for maintaining the imperative to value on cultural institutions like universities and schools, thereby encouraging the discourse of the imperative to value to become increasingly theorised. Yet he also partly falls into the trap of his own criticism of centring evaluation on academic criticism; he is concerned with the many facets of the ethics of translatability and exchange, but tends to concentrate on the implications of the economics of restricted production to the exclusion of the evaluation of one sub-field (particularly that of restricted production) by the other. When describing how academic discussion potentially restricts the issue, constituting 'a single mechanism or medium of exchange, a method of talking about value which, like the money-form in the sphere of the economic, in fact flattens and serializes value rather than actualizing it', he argues against his own status as an academic, when asserting that 'seen in this way, the

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34 *Theory and Cultural Value*, p.2.

35 *Theory and Cultural Value*, p.3.

institutionalization of value theory is a deterrence of value'.[36] He concedes that if contemporary critical theory seemingly avoids the issue of values and evaluation, it may be the result of 'negativity designed to enlarge the field of value, or to draw into exchange the very medium of exchange in which academic discussions of value have been conducted'.[37] He brings this back full circle to claim that 'this apparent turning away from value would then be seen as a turning back (out) towards value, and the account that this book offers of such a turn would represent an impoverishment, a translation of what is already a process of creative mistranslation into a generalized system of equivalence, the Esperanto of value'.[38] The contemporary Scottish poems I will discuss in this thesis also often suggest that avoiding comparisons of literary and economic values, or claiming that there is a simple rate of exchange between these values, is reductive. The relationship between literary and economic, between the sub-fields of literary production, is shown in these poems to be fraught; however, it is this tension which is central to many of the poems.

In Connor's argument, however, this tension between literary and economic preoccupations is also affected by time. In a subsequent essay, 'Between Earth and Air: Value, Culture and Futurity', he discusses questions of culture in the context of the perception of space; referring to an essay by David Harvey, Connor agrees that the 'spatiality of narrative and metaphor' is more important when considering how spaces

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36 *Theory and Cultural Value*, p.6.

37 *Theory and Cultural Value*, p.7.

38 *Theory and Cultural Value*, p.7.

of the future will be imagined than when describing the present.[39] To an extent, it could be argued that all methods of teaching reading and interpretation, which necessarily rely on at the least the illusion of rules, would allow the prediction of a reader's response by following an imagined route along a spatially described textual path; for example, Richards uses the moment of writing the Practical Criticism protocol as a sort of temporal lens to refract his students' paths of development, and shows how putting their interpretations up for judgement have, in his eyes at least, shown us as the observers how their reading will develop in one of a choice of directions. Connor also discusses Harvey's view that when financial capital is destabilised, the instinctive reaction is to invest cultural production with value and simply exchange money for cultural objects; but that also when the commercial world coincides with the cultural, it can 'harness the future' (Connor's phrase) by altering the consumption of the cultural product and so alter its financial economy.[40] He explains Harvey's argument as a contradiction in which 'the commercialization of culture is both a means of discounting the future into the present, of accelerating time, and also a means of sustaining the present into the future, of decelerating time', and he draws a parallel between the first 'airborne aesthetics' of culture as capital and the fetishistic nature of using culture as 'grounding' in the second.[41]

Connor then examines a similar argument made by Lyotard, in which capital economy's reliance on the time needed to accrue profits makes time itself into a

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39 Steven Connor, 'Between Earth and Air' (p.230); see also David Harvey, 'From Space to Place and Back Again: Reflections on the Condition of Postmodernity' in *Mapping the Future*, pp.3-29.

40 'Between Earth and Air', p.232.

41 'Between Earth and Air', p.232.

commodity. The time spent in making something must be redeemed by any means which give back an equivalent amount of 'abstract' or 'stocked-up' time (money or other goods representing equivalent labour). The aim of the system is to recoup the cost of the labour with interest, so that the investment is paid off by the return of more money (or 'abstract time') than was spent originally. 'Value therefore comes to consist, expecially in advanced multinational capitalism, not in specific yields or products but in the very speed of the economic process itself– literally the 'rate' of exchange rather than with the objects of exchange'.[42] He cites Lyotard's example of a book's costs that have been cancelled out by its sales, so that the book is therefore considered to be successful; the faster the sales the better the book is considered to be. These interpretations of economic space argue that, like visualisations of literary space, value is revealed in the destabilising co-existence of layers of historicity. Lyotard's argument is taken slightly further in that Connor uses this example to show that economically, the existence of something can only be verified as having happened if it has been paid for and recouped its costs; he quotes Lyotard's explanation that 'the rule is that what happens can happen only if it has [...] already happened'.[43] 'In a world in which value is speed,' Connor notes, 'such uses of language as the philosophical or the poetic seem to Lyotard to promise the wasteful integrity which offers a resistance to [...] [the] urge to store up and control time', and he points to Lyotard's argument for 'a time in which conclusions and economic returns are suspended, and put into question, rather than denied', a delay between the present exchange and the future interest.[44] Yet Connor's overall concern is that the constant

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42 'Between Earth and Air', p.233.

43 'Between Earth and Air', p.233.

44 'Between Earth and Air', pp.233-234.

evaluation of poetic worth should not simply be imagined in 'a frictionless space in which all values are equivalently suspended'.[45] He argues that the person who evaluates the contradictions of economic and cultural values is constantly fighting not to escape the contradictions of value but to 'dig oneself deeper into the double-bind of flight and grounding'; to avoid being limited by acquiescence to one or other system, the person who evaluates value should look for a 'threshold' between past, present and future value.[46]

'What are we doing when we toss a coin, / just a 5p piece into the shallow dish / of the fountain in the city-centre / shopping arcade?', Kathleen Jamie asked in 'Fountain'.[47] This financial exchange makes a wish for an apparently unachievable fantasy, surprisingly made possible by the narrative precedents of Arcadia as a place in which such things could have happened; here, too, layers of history can co-exist and disrupt expectations of value. In the space it takes to complete the poem on the page, the 5p piece of Jamie's poem has accrued enough interest to buy the experience of myth. It also represents an attempt to escape being identified as occupying a certain *habitus*; the remnants of a mythology of critical reading in which choosing not to analyse, or more accurately not to articulate analysis, is a deliberate attempt to opt out of the economies of cultural capital. The agents, as Bourdieu would term them, whose critical evaluations have obvious consequences for what poetry is published and read are understandably reluctant to discuss their judgement: "I'm looking for something I haven't read before

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45 'Between Earth and Air', p.235.

46 'Between Earth and Air', p.235.

47 Kathleen Jamie, 'Fountain', *The Queen of Sheba* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1994), p.17.

– describing the process is something I'm slightly superstitious about".[48] It is perhaps reasonable to describe these unspecified possibilities as, in themselves, an accepted part of judging contemporary poetry. In Jamie's poem, these possibilities which are never explained are suggestive aporia or lacunae between the disparate traditions (or mythologies) of preceding narratives – some of which the poem's humour exploits, in 'bags printed / Athena, Argos, Olympus; thinking: now / in Arcadia est I'll besport myself':

> What for, in the shopping mall?
> A wee stroke of luck? A something else, a nod
> toward a goddess we almost sense
> in the verdant plastic? Who says
> we don't respond; can't still feel,
> as it were, the dowser's twitch
> up through the twin handles of the buggy.[49]

The tossing of the coin is partly explained as a way of choosing between the abstractions implied by Arcadia and the contemporary version of the arcades. The scrutiny which examines the space controlled by the incompatible projects of the 'goddess' and 'the verdant plastic' is the scrutiny of the pupil, or inheritor. The poem questions whether reading the space of a literary project is really an arbitrary heads-or-tails choice between irrelevant mythologies; it suggests the richness of choice in the space created between

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48 Interview with Robin Robertson at Random House, London, 14 December 1998.

49 *QOS*, p.17.

the values of the marketplace and the values of cultural capital. The space can be traversed almost too effortlessly ('So we glide from mezzanine to ground') but it is possible and even desirable to live in that apparently in-between existence, to be able to respond to disparate values and to evaluative instability. It also retrieves the old-fashioned look afforded by the historical space of reading poetry, arguing that it retains a richness of judgement in the environment of the arcades; simply condemning the reader's *habitus*, particularly if it seems too old-fashioned, is not necessarily an improvement in evaluation. Although 'as it were' insinuates a lightness of touch and a freedom of supposition, the phrase is part of a perfectly serious game of value; contrary to the claims of a purely economic or a purely cultural set of values, we *can* still physically sense the 'as it were', the past, as an unnerving and destabilising reality. As Connor argues, it is possible to create a state of mind which can simultaneously include the stratified levels of sedimental, absolute values and the constantly moving escalators of relative value in a way which allows them to be 'thought together'.

For Bourdieu, 'structural lacunae' exist at the *centre,* or at the heart of any system which apparently promotes and gives canonical privileges to a historical accumulation of familiar texts, or 'already realized possibilities'. These lacunae are spaces of 'possible uses', 'which appear to wait and call for fulfilment', and they bear a strong resemblance to ambiguous, as yet undefined spaces that Richards finds and analyses at the centre of a communal space of reading;[50] but even in the act of 'realizing', and institutionalising, these spaces through revealing their possible reading, Richards found that they were giving him an old-fashioned look in return. And Docherty argues

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50 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. by Susan Emanuel (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996; Paris, 1992), pp.235-236.

that in approaching the spaces of culturally significant works as if they were dreams to be analysed gives them a retrospective history; the work is seen as attempting to realize its origin, to extend a historical context back to a source which may not even exist. In reading contemporary poems it is as if there is a strong temptation, or reason, to see the poems themselves as both readings and realizations of the dream state that produced them. That dream may be, like W. S. Graham's 'Implements in Their Places', a retrospective of the sorts of critical narratives that both produce and constrain the work; the critical narratives constitute stories which precede the work they apparently came into being to supplement or explain. Narrative, or at least the narrative of this space of criticism, does, as Docherty argues, '*become the privileged mode of textuality*' [his italics], as it does in the following story of the construction and influence of Practical Criticism.[51] The story depends not on a rejection of Richards's method of reading, but on the recognition that there were some material and theoretical circumstances, his *habitus*, from which he could not escape.

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51 Docherty, p.60.

Chapter 2

I. A. Richards and the Central Problems of Practical Criticism

> *Practical Criticism, of course, is the definitive test of the appreciation and understanding of literature.*[1]
>
> *1996 Higher English Principal Examiner's Report*

The story that pre-empts Practical Criticism lies in the opening words of I.A. Richards's *Principles of Literary Criticism*, in its second edition (1926); echoing a more architectural ambition to design functional living spaces, he asserted that 'a book is a machine to think with'.[2] In Chapter 1, I discussed works which are relevant to the visualisation of literary value, and the spatial terms in which connections can be drawn or denied between monetary value and cultural capital; the factor they all have in common is a compulsion to describe the space of value in theory. Richards laid the foundations for the view of Practical Criticism as anti-, or even ante-theory, and perhaps the persuasive manner in which he put his case partly accounts for the way in which his theory is defended as a critical tool which has nothing to do with literary politics. Yet reading *Practical Criticism* (1929) reveals a theory of reading which is consciously constructed from the theories of reading other fields; moreover, an awareness of Richards's personal and professional circumstances suggests that another influence, to do with the pressures of commercial production and its effects on reading, was equally

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1 From *Higher Grade English: 1996 Principal Examiner's Report* [Scottish Qualifications Authority: 1996], p.1.

2 I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1926), p.1.

consciously left out. In this chapter and those that follow I want to show how the reading, writing and production of contemporary poetry are still responsive to the explicit and the covert theoretical economies of the early part of the twentieth century. In particular, I want to discuss how, although Richards's approach to poetry is known for its rejection of biographical readings, his approach developed in this way precisely because of a need to eliminate the pressures of his own circumstances from his reading of poetry. I will also suggest parallels between *Practical Criticism* and some of the theoretical suggestions made by the American Pragmatists, particularly William James, which I believe Richards could not afford, professionally, to express.

When Richards arrived at Magdalene College as an undergraduate in 1911, he was not intending to read English at all. He began as a historian but changed to Moral Science; he told his history supervisor that 'he "didn't think History ought to have happened"' which, as his biographer John Paul Russo suggests, was as much a general dislike of the past as a rejection of the academic discipline of History in Richards's later work – Russo recounts that even in 1972 Richards still said that he '"hated the past" for its suffering and cruelty' and still 'looked ahead'.[3] The constant looking ahead, a sometimes apprehensive and sometimes ferocious expectation of transition, characterised the early part of his career from his scholarship status to insecure job prospects. The mountaineer in Richards very nearly beat the academic; the two precarious activities never quite disentangle themselves throughout the narrative of Russo's biography or the evidence of Richards's remaining papers in the Library at Magdalene.

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3 John Paul Russo, *I. A. Richards: His Life and Work* (London: Routledge, 1989), p.35.

As an undergraduate, his participation in the popular sport of climbing university buildings turned into a model for his determined onslaught on the university's more abstract institutional spaces, and one incident illustrated his determination to climb in both senses. His only serious brush with the college authorities was due to his methodical attempts to climb all the Magdalene buildings, and after a night-time climb when he and another student tied some kind of scarecrow figure to the clocktower above the Hall, the Master's reprimand was fuelled by a reminder of their scholarship status. 'It is a silly and impertinent thing for men, whose scholarships have been expressly prolonged, to do just now,' Benson noted indignantly, and he 'maintained that the men whom the college *paid* were not the men to rag'.[4] However, Richards's own mock-pompous account of the climb 'to raise a "devil" to the pinnacle' is neither repentant nor successfully intimidated by personal or professional danger; there is a final entry in his notebook of college climbs for another route attempted in June of that year, and he turned the incident into a heroically elaborate satire in a draft short story, 'The Day'.[5] Conquering collegiate pinnacles in order to raise devils, in one way or another, remained one of Richards's plotlines; however, like another justified sinner, he was also alarmed by the more sinister devils of the marketplace and printing offices.

Russo also documents another similar point of transition between money and mountaineering in Richards's career, during 1917-1925 while he was under pressure to find a job and was still trying to decide on an occupation; 'I was only doing what a lot of people do at universities, hanging about, waiting for a job. And I was suffering from

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4 A. C. Benson's diary for 28 February and 15 March 1915, cited by Russo, p.20.

5 'Clock-Tower', Notebook 12, I. A. Richards Collection, Magdalene College Library, Cambridge; 'The Day', I. A. Richards Collection.

what [J. K.] Ogden used to call "hand-to-mouth disease"'.[6] Russo defines the two influential climbs of Richards's career during 1918 as moments of which one was 'theoretical in its bearing, the second urgently practical'.[7] The first took place on a staircase, when a chance meeting with Ogden turned into a two-hour discussion on what became their collaborative work, *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923). The second was when Richards went to see Mansfield Forbes, who had fought for the instigation of English studies at Cambridge in 1917; Richards arrived for help finding work as a mountaineering guide and left with the offer of a job as a freelance lecturer.[8]

These anecdotes of Richards's intellectual and professional mountaineering seem representative of his fierce early desire to keep climbing higher. It seems partly an idealistic desire to reach an idealistic space which might lie ahead; in an undergraduate notebook in which he had written 'Only connect...' as an epigraph on the first page, an article by William James obviously caught his imagination, and he had copied out a passage referring to 'a continuum of cosmic consciousness against which our individuality builds but accidental fences and into which our several minds plunge as into a mother sea or reservoir'.[9] It is important that this quotation's emphasis on connection with, rather than defence against, others' judgement should be represented in language that is so very different from Richards's own later evocations of scientific study and objective analysis; it is also important, as I will discuss, that an image of defencelessness,

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6 Russo, p.48.

7 Russo, p.65.

8 See Russo, pp.65-66.

9 Notebook 25, titled 'Ideas and Poems', I. A. Richards Collection. The quotation is attributed to 'W James American Mag. Oct 1909'.

and possibly an imprecision in language, should come from a piece by James. There was also an element of wanting to reach Utopia before anyone else; an Alpine entry from an early climbing diary reads with some satisfaction 'view for IAR only. Rest loitered & missed it'.[10] And the final motivation is to escape the hampering criticisms of fellow academic climbers following his route, the night porters snapping at his heels, or the dreary strictures of hand-to-mouth disease.

Richards's early work as a defence and consolidation of his subject and budding department was prompted by his own need to find a specialism which would satisfy all his curiosities for intellectual conquest. As a temporary lecturer in the new School of English, with an academic background in philosophy and interests in psychology, he was scarcely likely to feel professionally secure. The Chair of English had only been established in 1910, and until 1917 there was no autonomous English School; accepting work there in 1918 was certainly not a career move in the direction of safety. Basil Willey, who audited Richards's lectures on the embryo Practical Criticism paper in 1925, considered himself to have been rash in switching subjects from History to English even in 1920, in the face of opposition towards the senseless frivolity of teaching English to the English. When the Chair was first proposed, one don said that the subject would end up centred on the later nineteenth century and would consequently be 'a Professorship of English fiction, and that of a light and comic character'.[11] Studying literature in English as a university discipline would also, its critics argued, require some sort of examination to grade the students. Broadly, that examination was imagined as either a

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10 Entry for 1910, 'Monte Moro', Notebook 1, I. A. Richards Collection.

11 Attributed to Dr J. Mayo in Basil Willey, *Cambridge and Other Memories, 1920-1953* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1968), p.12.

test of English language competence, or of the ability to recognise connections between literary texts and their historical periods. To examine anything else would be, as the President of the English Association argued in 1926, to examine taste:

> In this delicate field of æsthetics we have no degrees or diplomas to guide us as we have in Science or Law. A First Class in a University Arts Examination, whether classical or Modern, only proves knowledge, and we are looking for something subtler than that.[12]

He concluded that only time would encourage the student of art and literature to trust his own judgement: 'time is the only ultimate arbiter', and Bailey was confident that great art could be recognised by its resilience over time when lesser art would be forgotten.[13] Time, and a confidence in the authority of personal experience, however, were commodities which the examiner of English literature as a University subject could not afford. Its acceptance as a degree subject, and therefore something which could be examined, was still suffering from a pre-War sense that to examine literature was to goad the incompetent student and to commodify a gentleman's occupation. Grubbing about unnecessarily would only reveal unpleasant and compromising evidence:

> Examination, like mines and manufacture, is necessary; but to examine in English literature is like opening a coal mine in the Lake District. Why is examination necessary? Examination is a form of *peine forte et dure*, to compel the recalcitrant to plead. Why not settle the matter out of court? There is the greatest literature in the

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12 John Bailey, *A Question of Taste*, English Association Pamphlet 65 (Oxford: English Association, 1926), p.16.

13 Bailey, p.15.

world, written in your own tongue, why not read it, dispensing with examiners?[14]

Most previous study of English had been under the umbrella of Medieval and Modern Languages, concentrating on the philology of Middle English. Richards was building on the foundations set by the gentlemanly, essayist style of Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch and A. C. Benson, his Master at Magdalene, but they were foundations of which he did not approve. Instead, he was attempting to build a theory of practice with blocks from other disciplines of undeniable seriousness, while escaping the burden of studying English as an example of philological scholarship. Just as Richards remembered that 'we of the young English Tripos [...] thought of teaching English Literature as a very heaven',[15] Basil Willey remembered that to study under them in the 1920s was to be one of 'a happy band of pioneers, united by a common faith, despised perhaps by the older academics, but sure of a triumph in a glorious future [...] in at the start of an important new movement in University history', encouraged to avoid in their essays 'mere gossip, metaphorical vapourings and woolly mysticism'.[16]

The light and comic character of literature as entertainment was something which Richards could not afford to discuss, nor could he contemplate the fourth estate. Quiller-Couch, as Professor of English, visualised 'the man we are proud to send forth from our Schools' as someone 'remarkable less for something he can take out of his pocket and exhibit as knowledge, than for being [...] recognizable for a man of unmistakable

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14 Stanley Leathes, *The Teaching of English at the Universities*, English Association Pamphlet 26 ([n.p.]: English Association, 1913), pp.12-13.

15 I. A. Richards, 'On T.S.E.: Notes for a talk at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 29 June 1965' in *T.S.Eliot: The Man and His Work*, ed. by Allan Tate (London: Chatto, 1965), pp.7-15 (p.9).

16 Willey, pp.14-15.

intellectual breeding'.[17] This figure of the honourable English product is assumed, often tacitly, in much of *Practical Criticism*. The commercial taint to keeping knowledge in your pocket, ready to prove your worth on demand, and the worry of how best to exhibit knowledge and texts were two of Richards's main concerns. In his notes for one of the first Practical Criticism lectures of 1925, the heading 'How can we tell whether a poem is genuine or a fake?' makes poems sound like currency; the definition of *fake* is then supplied as 'a poem which purports to spring from one experience and actually springs from another'. A wary marginal note to the section reads 'Poet may of course write in order to make money'.[18] The possibility of the poet exchanging writing for money, and the reader exchanging money for the poet's work – and possibly exchanging that knowledge for money at a later date – is acknowledged only with discomfort throughout Richards's early work and career. In a note to the introduction of *Practical Criticism* he was careful to distance himself from implication in these activities:

> I am not without fears that my efforts may prove of assistance to young poets (and others) desiring to increase their sales. A set of formulae for 'nation-wide appeal' seems to be a just possible outcome.[19]

The main site of the personal civil wars in Richards's early career is a letter he wrote in 1923. In his first job as lecturer in Moral Science and English, he had suggested to A. C. Benson that an internal college exam at Magdelene could be based on 'five extracts of poetry and prose, with no clue as to author and date, and containing one

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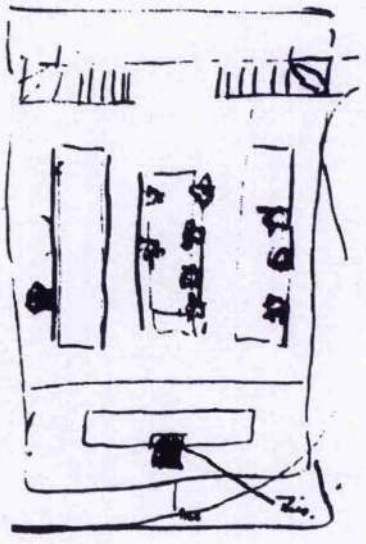
17 Willey, p.17.

18 From Lecture II, dated 'Oct 27 '25', Notebook 21, I. A. Richards Collection.

19 I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1929), p.9.

really worthless piece'.[20] The letter was written to his future wife Dorothea as he sat invigilating the exam which was the protoype for his lecture courses in 1924 and 1925 and provided him with the students' 'protocols', or readings of unattributed poems, which he analyses in *Practical Criticism* in 1929. He has illustrated the forum for his mental debates with a sketch of Magdelene's Hall, where the exam is being held, showing 'that gold and brown place with stairs going out of it, with coats of arms in the windows, and banners hanging from the roof' in manageable overview, but no amount of rationalisation prevents the invigilator from feeling uneasy similarities with those he calls 'the victims': 'I now am depressed. Magdelene is nearly too much for me'. On the sketch he has carefully labelled shapes representing 'Me' and 'This' (the letter) situated in front of the tables of exam candidates, one of whom, at the furthest table, appears to be leaning back with his arms behind his head returning the critical gaze of the reader or illustrator above:



20 Extract from Benson's diary for 13 October 1923, cited in *Selected Letters of I. A. Richards, CH,* ed. by J. Constable (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), p.28.

It is this sort of implicit criticism of his authority in the motives and process of the examination which comes up again and again; his isolated position within the college and wider university hierarchy becomes a map of his doubts about his role as a critic. On the one hand are the students below him, like the one drawn examining the observer, whom he suspects of accusing him with his own discarded early idealism:

> some of 'em respect me, think me happy freed from the need to satisfy other people's whims, in such matters. I if [sic] any scheme such as this had been mooted in my time would have refused I suspect. Some of 'em must by now hate me.[21]

On the other hand is the upward struggle towards recognition as an academic, achieved by making confident pronouncements on the 'mountains and reams of crabbed writing to read over. How I'm to decide I don't know'.[22] More troublingly, in his letter he cannot frame the questions which will give him answers on the ambivalence of his own position:

> What am I doing here? I ask myself. It's an educational institution: one of the best in the land no doubt. But I don't touch it and it doesn't touch me. Perhaps it might be worth while to, but it would mean a dreadful struggle.[23]

Even out of the immediate enclave of the developing Cambridge English Faculty, isolation threatens: 'And yet what is it?' the letter continues, 'Why do I despise literary people, men of letters [...] It is the false, professional air which destroys it all, I suspect'.

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21 I.A. Richards to D.E. Pilley, November 1923, in Box 1, I. A. Richards Collection. Published in the *Selected Letters*, pp.26-28.

22 *Selected Letters*, p.28.

23 *Selected Letters*, p.28.

Within this particular text, the presence of a semi-legitimate commercial space constantly threatens to encroach upon, or perhaps rescue Richards from, the environment which 'smells of dead thoughts'. It would offer rescue, in that it would provide him with an alternative living and leave him free to 'save my time for real work'; its threat would be the ways in which the non-institutional literary field would necessarily manifest itself, in the shape of the professional hierarchies of 'literary people, men of letters'. In the space which Richards so vividly provides in the letter, the stultifying physical atmosphere of the literal space which he repeatedly says does not allow his imagination any alternative situation ('I cannot think here any more than if I were upside down') is elided with a literary field which quantifies knowledge as a form of cultural capital: 'I won't coach any people any more for the English Tripos. It's iniquitous, profanation, to expect people to use literature for such purposes'.[24] Those purposes are to reveal the students' critical worth to public knowledge, quantifying them with the tainting 'professional air' into which they must translate their places in the academic system of value.

Recalling his first encounter, during the 'hand-to-mouth disease' years, with Eliot's *Ara Vos Prec* (1920), Richards presented his straitened circumstances – having to buy it with money he should have spent on lunch – and the physicality of reading the text as a combined experience.

> I remember sunlight on those large, fine pages and a breathless exhilaration as I came away with it – unable NOT to read it in the Market Place after happening on it in Galloway & Porter's bookshop – spreading the resplendent thing open: *lost in wonder*

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24 *Selected Letters*, p.28.

and strangeness and delight [my italics].[25]

The very enjoyment of the 'fineness' of the printed book is, perhaps, a literal escape, climbing out of the noisy marketplace and into a new, hermetical world of 'wonder and strangeness'. For a critic who constantly emphasised the importance of contextual awareness, losing himself with the aid of 'fineness' and impractically spent money would be the greatest acknowledgement he could make to the unacknowledgeable encroachment of professionalism and trade. Yet an alternative interpretation would be that Richards had allowed himself to become lost by stepping over a threshold into the charms of a wholly different literary field; the description could be a revelling in the material beauty of the book, taking pleasure in the accident of buying the book in a particular shop, aware of how else the money should be spent, his complicity with the 'wonder and strangeness and delight' of the noisy market place he was drawn into and in which, guiltily and against his conventions of reading, he could become 'unable NOT to read'.

Concentrating on the central ambiguities of interpretation in poetry, however, frees him from mentioning possibly shady deals being done on the margins of his field; the threshold between the values of a field of restricted literary production and its economic opposite of large-scale production, to use Bourdieu's terms. Russo argues that 'Richards's criticism became virtually synonymous with two poetic devices, irony and ambiguity', and established an awareness of ambiguity as central to text and its interpretation.[26] 'Ambiguity' applies as much to the equivocal terms of critical discussion

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25 'On T. S. E.', p.8.

26 Russo, p.277.

which Richards inherited, like '"sentimentality", "truth", "sincerity" or "meaning" itself'.[27] Reading therefore also became, in Richards's terms, a way of clambering around the space of institutionalised criticism, learning how its collegiate space could be mapped into 'a plan of the ways in which the likely ambiguities of any given term or opinion-formula may radiate':

> Ambiguity in fact is systematic; the separate senses that a word may have are related to one another, if not as strictly as the various aspects of a building, at least to a remarkable extent. Something comparable to a 'perspective' which will include and enable us to control and 'place' the rival meanings that bewilder us in discussion and hide our minds from one another can be worked out.[28]

Margins, both philosophical and textual, are devalued simply because Richards argued with the conviction of fear that no important meaning is ever found in the margins of a text; only in the etymological centre of a critical term is there any value for the reader, because 'the study of the ambiguities of one term' simply 'assists in the elucidation of another'.[29]

Practical Criticism, in this light, is an exercise in forcibly crossing thresholds of exchange, inscribing defence mechanisms on the territory beyond in order not to be left in that worst of all possible positions; faced with ambiguity and too terrified by the thought of others' judgements to be able to articulate a genuine opinion which takes into account the many facets of meaning. Instead, Richards describes how readers may try

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27 *Practical Criticism*, p.9.

28 *Practical Criticism*, p.10.

29 *Practical Criticism*, p.9.

to defend themselves with what he called 'stock' responses, pre-fabricated standard readings which can quickly be offered to placate judgemental peers. He provides a particularly vivid image towards the end of the book:

> [T]he sincere and innocent reader is much too easily bounced into emptying his mind by any literary highwayman who says 'I want your opinion' and much too easily laid low because he has nothing to produce on these occasions. He might be comforted if he knew how many professionals make a point of carrying stocks of imitation currency, crisp and bright, which satisfy the highwaymen and are all that even the wealthiest critic in these emergencies can supply.[30]

It is perhaps the most concise explanation of *Practical Criticism*; a self-defence exercise against the vagaries of economic attack, the principles of exchange economy which infiltrate literary value with 'imitation currency'. As a student, Richards was reminded that he was reliant on a college scholarship, then as a young graduate he was reliant on part-time teaching and lecturing work; in these positions, he had an ambivalent approach to figures of authority, like A. C. Benson, whose representation of institutional power he thought, as is clear from his letter to Dorothea, he might himself start to resemble in the eyes of younger readers ('some of 'em must by now hate me'). His own circumstances and personal papers reveal the logic behind his aspirations for a critical space entirely free of those pressures of a biographical reading of his own motives, and free of the professional necessities which he feared encroached on his own reading – a critical space completely at odds with the hall in Magdalene College, and perhaps one which could only exist in his theoretical construction.

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30 *Practical Criticism*, p.318.

When Richards stated that ambiguity in language is systematic, whether it is critical language or the language of a poem, and compared etymological meaning to the elevations of a building, he assumed a readership both terrified of the task of mapping their own critical space and compelled to do so in self-defence. 'We might become less easily imposed upon by our fellows and by ourselves,' he claims, if we can find 'some discipline that will preserve us from these [...] dangers'.[31] The reader needs to hand 'some objective criteria, by which poetry can be tested, and the good distinguished from the bad' or he will feel 'like a friendless man deprived of weapons and left naked at the mercy of a treacherous beast', as he says in the Conclusion.[32] Through a process of recognition of potential traps of response which the reader can fall into:

> we decided that the treacherous beast was within him, that critical weapons – unless too elaborate to be employed – would only hurt him, that his own experience – not as represented in a formula but in its available entirety – was his only safeguard.[33]

The unease in Richards's letter from the exam hall, or within the evaluative sections of *Practical Criticism*, is not so much a fear of the specific types of space but of transience, of the thresholds available between cultural fields and between the sorts of role he and his students might be expected to play in them.

The value of poetry in Richards's terms, as he discusses it in the Introduction to the book, is as a 'central and typical denizen' of the world of 'abstract opinion and

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31 *Practical Criticism*, p.350.

32 *Practical Criticism*, p.314.

33 *Practical Criticism*, pp.314-315.

matters of feeling'.[34] However, he sees this not only as of interest in itself, but because, in the terms of vulnerability and pursuit which he frequently uses to describe criticism, poetry acts as 'bait' for anyone interpreting a reader by means of his or her interpretation of a poem.[35] In Chapter 1, I described Thomas Docherty's suggestion that a poem can offer not only a conscious, intended interpretation of its own situation for readerly analysis, but can also provide unconscious comment. In *Practical Criticism*, Richards suggests that both poem and readerly comment are equal candidates for interpretation by an 'alienist' or analyst. To reveal these unconscious processes in poem and reader, for Richards, is to regard the sharing of interpretation as an 'indecent' spectacle, on a par with watching the inmates of psychiatric hospitals; to watch the process of interpretation is 'like some sights of the hospital-ward very serviceable to restore proportions and recall to us what humanity, behind all its lendings and pretences, is like'.[36] His description of what is happening to the readerly opinions he analyses is shocked and shocking in its insistence on how the comparative evaluation of readers' interpretations creates a terrifying vulnerability: 'here are our friends and neighbours – nay, our brothers and sisters – caught at a moment of abandon giving themselves and their literary reputations away with an unexampled freedom'.[37] Several years before writing that footnote, he had described the space of the exam hall, and by implication the space of academia, as filled now with 'a numbing, numbing devil', as if the escapade from his student climbing days has rebounded on him and rendered him helpless through a phobia of academic

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34 *Practical Criticism*, p.6.

35 *Practical Criticism*, p.6.

36 *Practical Criticism*, p.7, n.1.

37 *Practical Criticism*, p.7, n.1.

professionalism.[38] Equally he describes a fear of the possible scope of the literary subfields which lie beyond his own, a fear which he seems to find easy to identify in his students and in any hypothetical reader about to read a poem. Richards's own fear of exposing a reader's interpretation to an evaluation on the open market can therefore be read as the material of psychoanalytic scrutiny, as he argued that in fact any interpretation should and must be read; we can in turn examine his own comments for 'the mental goings-on that led him [the reader] to use the words'.[39]

In an essay called 'First Hates: Phobias in Theory', the psychiatrist and critic Adam Phillips describes the accounts given by William James and by Freud of phobia, particularly of agoraphobia. For Phillips, William James in particular presents the agoraphobic as reliving an archaic fear that in an open space they were vulnerable to predators, and James therefore saw phobias themselves as an evolutionary anachronism; the phobic exhumes a primitive suspicion that stepping into an open space may leave him or her vulnerable, in Richards's terms, to the treacherous beast. Phillips argues that all phobias are similarly centred on a space of exchange, where the phobic person fears that, as they read the space of their surroundings, their familiar theory of what is frightening within that space may be exchanged for another, unfamiliar, theory; an *agora,* literally a marketplace of conflicting theories, is a space in which the agoraphobic fears that 'something nasty is going to be exchanged'.[40] Richards's books are in part to be read as symptoms of his own fears of the academic *agora* which seemed to him, in the 1920s,

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38 *Selected Letters,* p.28.

39 *Practical Criticism*, p.7.

40 Adam Phillips, 'First Hates: Phobias in Theory', in *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life* (London: Faber, 1993), pp.5-21 (p.8).

to turn all critical endeavour into the currency of cultural capital. He perhaps constructed these pieces of cerebral machinery to think through his fears for him at a distance; as he wrote of the institutional space of the university, 'I don't touch it and it doesn't touch me. Perhaps it might be worth while to, but it would mean a dreadful struggle'.[41]

Practical Criticism was perhaps for Richards a way of thinking about the pressures of the marketplace and their effects on the reader, but without conscious acknowledgement of how important the exchange of theory, and the exchanges of the marketplace, were to his ideal communal space of interpretation. Phillips describes the agoraphobic as 'the figure of the compromised pragmatist':

> The threshold of experience between this one moment and the next is aversive. He wants to go somewhere – or, in James's more suggestive terms, be led somewhere – but he is unable to find out whether it is as worthwhile (in both senses) as he thinks. The terror, or the inability to hold the terror, pre-empts possible future states of mind, and so precludes their evaluation.[42]

James presented the individual's transition from one state to another as a means to the most exigent truth for the circumstances. Richards feared that evolution from one interpretive truth to another would be a series of gradually demeaning transactions, producing multiple objective truths and shattering educational standards. I have been arguing that Richards was afraid of commercial transactions, of the encroachment of what Bourdieu later called the sub-field of commercial production on the cultural

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41 *Selected Letters*, p.28.

42 'First Hates', p.7.

detachment of the ideal academy. I now want to turn to the parallels between the kind of comparative evaluation Richards was afraid of, and the comparative evaluations of American Pragmatism. Finally, I want to discuss how some of the problems Richards tried to avoid in the 1920s are still evident in discussions of the place of practical criticism in education, not least Scottish education, today.

The connections between Richards's approach to the teaching of poetry and to his reluctant place in the cultural economies of his time, and American Pragmatism are entirely a set of parallel circumstances which have their place in the margins of Richards's critical writing. In a marginal note to a series of lectures on 'Modern Poetry', given in 1924-25 when he was collecting the material for *Practical Criticism*, Richards described William James as 'a genial american [sic] who dabbled in Psychology'. Richards, of course, had also 'dabbled in Psychology', and would raid its approaches for the terminology and logic of *Practical Criticism*. The comment is written next to a mention of James's *A Pluralistic Universe*, at a point in the lecture notes where Richards had been discussing Yeats's regrettable tendency to write from 'the experience of a part only of the mind, a part broken loose'. Yeats, the notes continue, 'came to believe in a racial or earth memory by which the emotional experience of remote ancestors might be inherited by us now and be retained in th'unconscious' [*sic*]; such explanations of primitive memory and the activities of the unconscious are firmly discarded by Richards as excuses for inadequate thinking.[43] The description of James's achievements is perfunctory, but Richards clearly knew this particular book well enough to refer to it in the lecture, in the context of Yeats and following a reference to Jung, with no more

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43 'M[odern] P[oetry] V', Notebook 2, I. A. Richards Collection.

written aids than its title, the comment on James and a small drawing (apparently a mostly-submerged iceberg, perhaps referring to the preceding comment he had planned on Jung and the collective unconscious).

Further marginal evidence appears in Richards's early university career, his notebooks and *Practical Criticism*. As an undergraduate Richards had written an essay on *A Pluralistic Universe* under the supervision of W. E. Johnson who, according to his biographer Russo, was one of the tutors he had trusted most.[44] James is even briefly cited to corroborate Richards's arguments in a footnote in *Practical Criticism* – a marginal position in itself worthy of interest in that book, where its most intriguing asides tend to be situated.[45] However, at this early stage in Richards's teaching career there seems to be no outright discussion of William James's work, either on psychology or on Pragmatism. Pragmatism was a thorny subject in the discussion of the university teaching and examination of degree subjects; as Scottish universities had shown in the long-running Ordinance 70 debate between 1916 and 1927, it was not simply a question of what entrance requirements were reasonable for both arts and sciences, in light of the fact that many students' educational circumstances had changed.[46] Adopting what might be seen as more lenient or inclusive entrance requirements had deeper implications for almost all university disciplines, because it meant the adoption of a basically Pragmatist theory of education. Though conscious of these Scottish educational debates, I will

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44 Russo, p.47.

45 'Though traditionally belief has been discussed along with judgement it is, as William James pointed out, more allied to choice.' *Practical Criticism*, p.274, n.1.

46 See George Elder Davie, 'Whittaker, Gibson and Ordinance 70', *The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1986), pp.27-37.

concentrate here on the points of similarity between *Practical Criticism* and William James's popular book of 1907, *Pragmatism*.

James's vision of the practical application of thought is described in terms of how easily one can practically navigate the public space of conflicting theories; in James's terms, *Practical Criticism* describes Richards's evolutionary critical spaces under threat from the continued antagonism of theories. *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* is the published collection of public lectures given in New York in 1907. They explain and consolidate James's view of a body of thought in which he, Charles Sanders Peirce and John Dewey were considered the main figures, although they later differed as to how Pragmatism was defined (or whether it was in fact definable). In *Pragmatism,* a large part of James's early discussion is taken up with explaining what he sees as the impossibilities of a purely rationalist thought. He contrasted two sorts of imaginative spaces; one, 'the world to which your philosophy professor introduces you', seems elegant and built on rational principles but is 'a classic sanctuary in which the rationalist fancy may take refuge from the intolerably confused and gothic character which mere facts present'.[47] The other is a tense and confusing environment: 'the world of concrete personal experiences [...] multitudinous beyond imagination, tangled, muddy, painful and perplexed'.[48] James argues that the muddy and mundane human being, unlike the academic philosopher, is compelled to acknowledge the need for a route through the conflicting beliefs which they encounter, some way of discussing and evaluating the contradictory experiences of theory.

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47 William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1907), p.21.

48 *Pragmatism,* pp.21-22.

Like Steven Connor's exhortation to 'think together' sometimes conflicting senses of value, James's Pragmatism joins competing philosophical theories. James uses the democratic metaphor of 'a corridor in a hotel', but in an essay of 1906, he had already described Pragmatism as 'a great *corridor theory*'; he used that passage again in his lectures, but only after making some small and telling changes.[49] The metaphor of access in 1906 seemed less ameliorative than its appearance in 1907, and more as if Pragmatism opened the way to a chaos of conflicting theories which would threaten the status quo.

> [Pragmatism] is like a corridor in a hotel, from which a hundred doors open into a hundred chambers. In one you may see a man on his knees praying to regain his faith; in another a desk at which sits some one eager to destroy all metaphysics; in a third a laboratory with an investigator looking for new footholds by which to advance upon the future. But the corridor belongs to all, and all must pass there. Pragmatism, in short, is a great *corridor-theory.*[50]

But by the lectures of 1907, James's description of differing personal truths, offered a means of escape by the pragmatic corridor, has been changed to show Pragmatism allowing alternative beliefs to function harmoniously together. At the same time James has heightened his emphasis on its central position in the theoretical market-place:

> [Pragmatism] lies in the midst of our theories, like a corridor in a hotel. Innumerable chambers open out of it. In one you may find a man writing an atheistic volume; in the

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49 *Pragmatism,* p.54.

50 'G. Papini and the Pragmatist Movement in Italy', in *Collected Essays and Reviews by William James*, ed. by Ralph Barton Perry (London: Longmans, Green, 1920), pp.459-466 (pp.462-463), (first publ. in *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, 3 (1906), 337-341).

> next some one on his knees praying for faith and strength; in a third a chemist investigating a body's properties. In a fourth a system of idealistic metaphysics is being excogitated; in a fifth the impossibility of metaphysics is being shown. But they all own the corridor, and all must pass through it if they want a practicable way of getting into or out of their respective rooms.[51]

James now shows faith not lost but fervently re-examined, and the destruction of metaphysics is now rhetorically balanced by its revaluation. His defence in the 1906 piece of Pragmatism as 'armed neutrality in the midst of doctrines' has disappeared by the 1907 lecture, the emphasis now on the 'practicable' advantages of the approach rather than implications of iconoclasm or threat.[52] James's rhetoric has the persuasiveness of an Uncle Pandarus removing objections to the gentle elimination of a fixed, objective morality as a 'sterile' absolutism, his comment at the beginning of the book typifying his tone: 'I am well aware how odd it must seem to some of you to hear me say that an idea is 'true' so long as to believe it is profitable to our lives'.[53]

Principally, James argues that fixed moral standards imply the surrender of personal responsibility to a fixed code of behaviour, and that whilst this is actually a 'moral holiday', it must be tempered by constant comparison with individual circumstances.[54] He characterises Pragmatism as a humanisation of abstractions; an idea cannot be held to be valid unless it would have an impact on real time, real space, real

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51 *Pragmatism*, p.54.

52 'G. Papini and the Pragmatist Movement in Italy', p.462.

53 *Pragmatism*, p.75.

54 *Pragmatism*, p.79.

events. A theory (and he illustrates this in terms of chemical or physical theory) in competition with another theory for the explanation of a phenomenon is of no significance if it only differs from the first theory in abstract details but still accounts for exactly the same phenomenon. The significance lies in the application of the theory since its only validation is in its practice, and belief is only invested or truth held to be in ideas or theories '*which themselves are but part of our experience [...] in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience*'.[55] It regards each abstract concept as merely a word from which 'you must bring out [...] its practical cash value'.[56] He characterises Pragmatism as a mediation between any individual's familiar, and possibly conservative, 'stock of old opinions' and the unknown; an idea is acceptable in Pragmatism and considered to be true as long as it is 'any idea upon which we can ride, so to speak; any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily, working securely, simplifying, saving labour'.[57] As he describes Pragmatism, it is an anti-intellectual approach thriving on honesty but not necessarily on sophistication of theory; sophistry had to be hidden by James's rhetoric in order to provide a more palatable style of explanation. It is a celebration of the creative ability of compromise between competing theories, and a way of creating an equivalence of value between them.

Yet it seems to be Richards who reiterates, almost as often as he repeats the fear of exposure and vulnerability within this dilemma, the necessity of seeing critical taste

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55 *Pragmatism*, p.58.

56 *Pragmatism*, p.53.

57 *Pragmatism*, p.58.

and emotional response to poetry as phenomena which can best be understood with the aid of contemporary psychology and, in less forthright terms, an understanding of value and exchange. In the syllabus for Part I of the Moral Sciences Tripos in which Richards took a First in 1915, approximately a quarter of the course devoted to psychology as a clue to human reasoning and a subsection of another paper contains a specific section on the comparison of 'practical philosophy' and 'theoretical philosophy'.[58] If James did not influence, he certainly paralleled Richards in his constant emphasis on the practical demonstrability of psychology, and the necessity for establishing in his students a technique and taste in their approach to reading, the critical equivalent of the early formation of *habitus*. A sense in which the word 'practical' in Practical Criticism also means a *habitus* which is recognisably created by social standing and the exchange of money is directly visible in one of Richards's 1925 lectures, when he took for granted that his audience could recognise the cultural assumptions instilled into their (apparently homogeneous) social group from an early age:

> People at Cambridge are generally people who live in circles where some general acquaintance with great literature and great art is more or less presupposed as a part of their natural social background DON'T sufficiently realise the scorn and contempt with which poets, poetry and artists in general are regarded say by medical men, Mayors, aldermen, financial magnates and *practically influential* people [my italics].[59]

'Practical', in this sense, means economically sophisticated, rather than any reference to philosophical sophistication, yet the ambiguity between the everyday and the possible

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58 The syllabus for the Moral Sciences Tripos was almost completely unchanged during the period Richards was an undergraduate; see Cambridge Calendars for the years 1911-1915.

59 From section headed 'Criticism 1924-5 Lecture I', Notebook 2.

philosophical and critical senses of the word 'practical' haunts Richards's evolving literary theory; *Practical Criticism* perhaps contains even in its title an indication of the ambiguities Richards found within critical language.

There is no escape from the practical influence of the career ladder, and no escape from the knowledge that his judgements as a critic or an examiner bring a world of commercial transaction and 'profanation' a degree closer. The letter from the examination hall captures Richards in a spatial point of transaction, in the claustrophobically stultifying choices of career and critical approach. It also captures him at a temporal point of his career, during the long transition from a restless undergraduate to a lecturer paid to teach the expression of whatever critical choices his pupils had already acquired. *Practical Criticism*, even if reluctantly, nonetheless incorporates a professional awareness of the opportunistic speed with which truths can be discarded by developing intellects, and is inevitably aware that the moment of such transactions of judgement is crucial. In a description in Practical Criticism which parallels James's 'corridor theory' description of Pragmatism, Richards describes every method of interpretation as only free of the tainted acquisition of professional value at the outset of its history:

> The original difficulty of all reading, the problem of making out the meaning, is our obvious starting-point. The answers to those apparently simple questions: 'What is a meaning?' 'What are we doing when we endeavour to make it out?' 'What is it we are making it out?' are the master-keys to all the problems of criticism. If we can make use of them the locked chambers and corridors of the theory of poetry open to us.[60]

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60 *Practical Criticism*, p.180.

Practical Criticism itself could be said to have accumulated interest since its conception. Yet the edginess about confusion between monetary and literary value is part of its inheritance; the conflict in Richards's writing between a desire for one untainted standard of value and an intellectual attraction to the possibilities of pragmatic pluralism is still visible in the arguments of supporters and detractors of what has come to be read as the theory-free field of Practical Criticism. I have discussed some of the details in Richards's papers and biography which show him deeply troubled by the position of professional persuader or teacher in which he found himself, and pressurised by the demands of professional academia. It also seems clear that the economic and professional influences which formed Richards's thinking in *Practical Criticism* are still very much in evidence; the same debates that Richards attempted to navigate with the formation of the theory are still present for those who continue to teach it today.

Perhaps this is because, as Wallace Martin suggests in a recent essay on 'Criticism and the Academy', Practical Criticism's value has been further complicated by the ends for which it has been used – or rather, for the ends to which subsequent histories of the development of literary criticism have decided that it has been used. Its influence on criticism is usually traced by means of the impression it made on academics who were practising teachers and critics; just as Richards developed the material of Practical Criticism through the necessities of his own teaching practice, other practitioners picked over the text and the methods of Practical Criticism, adapting it for their own needs and teaching methods. In English literary studies, there was a desperate need for teaching methods which were not suitable only for advanced students and those who carried forward critical practices, but suitable, for example, for the 'Civil Service, Matriculation

and other' examination candidates who were the target audience of books like *How to Know Good Poetry, and to Say Why It Is Good.*[61] Wallace Martin maintains that the success of Practical Criticism within the teaching of English Studies was due to 'its usefulness in teaching English at the introductory level', that it was 'clearly the most important innovation in English studies' and that its use in teaching English in both Britain and America was firmly due to I. A. Richards and to American critics who learned about his work while studying in England.[62]

In Cambridge, Richards's direct influence was notable in the work of William Empson, one of his postgraduate students, and F. R. Leavis, who was two years younger than Richards and had also begun his undergraduate studies at Cambridge in History. Queenie Roth, who was a former student of Leavis and whose doctoral thesis Richards supervised, married Leavis and worked closely with him. It was Leavis's enthusiasm which is generally credited with carrying Practical Criticism to schools by way of the colleges of education in which some of his former students taught.[63] As we have seen in Chapter 1, recent guides to Practical Criticism now cite Richards's *Practical Criticism* as the origin of Practical Criticism. Yet, as Richard Ohmann has noted, Richards's influential practice has most frequently been discussed, and justified, by the history of the American New Criticism. Ohmann comments that though a handful of essays by 'Cleanth Brooks, William Empson, R.P. Blackmur and the I. A. Richards of *Practical*

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61 Peter MacBrien, *How to Know Good Poetry, and to Say Why It Is Good* (Dublin: [np], 1931), title page.

62 See Wallace Martin, 'Criticism and the Academy' in *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism 7: Modernism and the New Criticism,* ed. by A. Walton Litz, Louis Menand and Lawrence Rainey (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), pp.269-321.

63 See Martin, p.297.

Criticism' and 'the sacred textbook [by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren], *Understanding Poetry*' are what taught his generation of university teachers 'how to write papers as students, how to write articles later on, and what to say about a poem to *our* students in a fifty-minute hour', it is always the theories of the American New Critics which habitually have provided the 'rationale' for the pedagogic use of Practical Criticism.[64] Mark Royden Winchell, in his study of Cleanth Brooks, calls Richards's book 'an exercise in pedagogy' and points out that 'whatever else it may be, applied criticism is also remedial reading'; it would appear that because Practical Criticism is seen as so influential in the basic, introductory teaching of poetry, it is assumed to be less theoretically sophisticated, or historically influential, than the literary theory which has been considered to have subsumed it.[65]

This theory is often held to be the New Criticism developed in America, of whom the central figures were John Crowe Ransom, and his former students Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks, who met at Vanderbilt University in Nashville. Warren introduced Brooks to *Practical Criticism*, and *Principles of Literary Criticism*, when they were studying in Oxford on Rhodes Scholarships during 1929-30. Brooks enthusiastically persuaded Tate and Ransom to consider Richards's books, although Ransom was always critical of Richards's work.[66] What Richard Ohmann calls Brooks and Warren's 'sacred textbook', *Understanding Poetry* (1938), was itself influenced by

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64 Richard Ohmann, 'Teaching and Studying Literature at the End of Ideology' in *The New Criticism and Contemporary Literary Theory: Connections and Continuities*, ed. by William J. Spurlin and Michael Fischer (New York: Garland, 1995), pp.75-100 (p.79).

65 Mark Royden Winchell, *Cleanth Brooks and the Rise of Modern Criticism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), p.69.

66 See Martin, pp.297-8.

Richards's work. It was well-received on its publication in America; as Ohmann's affectionate description implies, it became one of the classic teaching texts in America, and René Wellek amongst others credits it with establishing in 'American colleges and universities [...] the turn to text'.[67]

It was also a popular text-book in Britain, where New Criticism's presence is usually seen as shaped, if not established, by F. R. Leavis. Wallace Martin warns that:

> As conceived by Richards, practical criticism facilitated psychic adjustment to a society in which science provided the standard of truth, and literature helped people live with it. As conceived by Leavis, it became a means of exposing the shortcomings of that society in comparison with the organic community that purportedly preceded it.[68]

Clearly, Martin's description of Richards's Practical Criticism is of a teaching practice based on recognising an equivalence in value between the literary 'standard of truth' which he considers in detail, and the scientific analogies – those of moral science, social sciences and of psychology – which he borrowed in the writing of *Practical Criticism*. Martin's description of Leavis's critical practice, in contrast, implies a sympathy with revolt against the status quo, although 'exposing the shortcomings' of society and particularly of academic society was also how Richards's generation made their mark on English studies.

As Richards commented in the introduction to *Practical Criticism*, perhaps again anticipating future critics laying siege to his methods,'The history of criticism [...] is a

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67 René Wellek, 'The New Criticism: Pro and Contra', in *The New Criticism and Contemporary Literary Theory*, pp.55-72 (p.65).

68 Martin, p.297.

history of dogmatism and argumentation'.[69] As I have discussed in Chapter 1, the process of overturning established practices and values is recognised, for example by Bourdieu, as part of the next generation's establishment of itself. We have already seen how Richards predicted that his reputation and, particularly, the methods of Practical Criticism would undergo this kind of iconoclastic criticism from his peers; however, some of the most energetic refutation of Richards's generation of critics came in the 1980s. For example, in his textbook for English studies, the influential *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983), Terry Eagleton argued that New Criticism was a method of teaching which was more akin to crowd-control than the instillation of standards of truth, and dismissed it as a way of 'committing yourself to nothing' for critics alarmed by the Cold War into 'submission to the political status quo'.[70] Eagleton also condemned Richards's method of gathering evidence of critical habits for *Practical Criticism* because, he argues, Richards failed to recognise how close he was in terms of social and critical values to his student audience 'and was thus unable to recognize fully that local, "subjective" differences of evaluation work within a particular, socially structured way of perceiving the world'.[71] This can be refuted in part by Richards's comments in his lecture notes on how the 'natural social background' of 'People at Cambridge' limits understanding of how cultural values vary widely, but Eagleton's review of critical history was persuasive for many readers.

After this sort of body-blow to Practical Criticism, it would be reasonable to

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69 *Practical Criticism*, p.8.

70 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p.50.

71 Eagleton, pp.15-16.

expect the practice to lie down and die quietly. Richards's reputation as a critic and as an influential teacher is eclipsed by that of Leavis, who is credited with a more ambitious programme for English, and a more explicit agenda of professionalisation than Richards's. Colin Evans, in *English People: The Experience of Teaching and Learning English in British Universities* (1993), describes Richards as leaving behind him 'not a theory but a practice – "practical criticism"'; but from the results of his research, Evans also concludes that 'it seems clear now that the *Leavisite* approach was about professionalization' [my italics].[72] The origin of Practical Criticism in education is still strongly linked with the Leavisite legacy, rather than with Richards, and is still linked with the New Criticism of particularly Brooks and Warren. Yet the practice of Practical Criticism has outlasted the rise and fall of Leavis's agenda and even of New Criticism. Despite a conviction in English studies that the critical manifesto of Richards, Leavis and the American New Critics was divorced from any sense of social or historical context, their teaching methods in the shape of Practical Criticism are sometimes also defended as the demonstration of an acute historical awareness, because in order to comment on a poem's date and style it is necessary to refer to knowledge of literary and social history.[73] Yet the actual practice of Practical Criticism has been dissociated from its part in the history of literary theory. As such, it may have mutated over the years but its principal value for teaching remains unchanged. In summary, the practice remains in the bloodstream of the education system as a way of teaching which will give teachers some sense of guidance in tackling texts in the classroom or tutorial, give students some sense

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72 See Colin Evans, *English People: The Experience of Teaching and Learning English in British Universities* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993), pp.15-16 and p.132.

73 See Martin, p.297.

of confidence in preparing for examinations, and which may, more elusively, be associated with teaching the students to become better people in some way.

In the secondary education system in Scotland there seems to be a persistent link between the reading of poetry using methods very similar to Practical Criticism, and teaching future citizens how to express themselves – how to be morally responsible rhetoricians. Under the Scottish Qualifications Authority, the Practical Criticism paper is optional in both the Revised Higher and the Revised Certificate of Sixth Year Studies exams, and is compulsory in the Higher Still exam, when it will go under the name of 'Textual Analysis'. Examiners' reports for Higher and CSYS English from 1993-98 show that while the candidates sitting the Practical Criticism papers are always in a minority (hovering around 30% in the CSYS exam, rising above 30% in 1996-1998), a consistent support for the paper is reported from markers and teachers. The examination of Practical Criticism by the SQA is different from the exam paper that one of Richards's students might have been tackling in the Hall at Magdalene.[74] Candidates are compelled to maintain a close engagement with the text by a series of questions, although the questions in the 1998 paper were felt by the Principal Examiner to be 'relatively open-ended' with 'no tightly framed "closed" questions'.[75] Yet the end result is the same; they are persuaded to conclude that there is an answer for every question set by the examiner, and therefore for every nuance of textual tone, in what Richards described as the 'bare

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74 See also Introduction, n.1.

75 From *CSYS English 1998: Principal Examiner's Report* [Scottish Qualifications Authority:1998], p.5. The reports were made available to me by the Scottish Qualifications Authority, and are quoted with their permission.

words before [them] on the paper'.[76] And it would be difficult to deny the ghostly presence of Richards behind the markers' shoulders, as the Scottish Higher English Principal Examiner's comment showed in 1996; 'Practical Criticism, of course, is the definitive test of the appreciation and understanding of literature.'[77] The report on the CSYS English Practical Criticism in 1998 is enthusiastic, commenting that 'the uptake of this paper continues to prove encouraging':

> It appears that both candidates (and teachers) are becoming increasingly confident and skilled in their approach to the analysis and evaluation of unseen literary texts [...]
>
> Markers reported a fairly even uptake of all four questions, with particularly incisive responses to both of the poetry questions. Underpinning the responses of the vast majority of candidates, there was good evidence of relevant preparation for this paper: confident reading of texts; familiarity with critical terminology; appreciation of the importance of substantiating comment with relevant textual evidence; a willingness to engage with and respond to the tone and stance of the writer.[78]

It seems likely that, as well as the knotty problem of 'analysis and evaluation', the phrases 'confident reading' and 'engage with and respond to the tone and stance of the writer' indicate that a level of proficiency both in identifying rhetoric and in using it is required of Practical Criticism candidates if they are to be successful in exams, although this may not be how the requirement is phrased in the classroom or in the markers'

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76 *Practical Criticism*, p.4.

77 From *Higher Grade English: 1996 Principal Examiner's Report* [Scottish Qualifications Authority: 1996], p.1.

78 From *CSYS English 1998: Principal Examiner's Report*, p.5.

meetings.

Confidence is cited as not only vital for the exam candidate, but also for the teacher. In 1979, the Scottish Certificate for Education Examination Board was producing guidance on how to mark pupils' Practical Criticism exercises because 'the marking of practical criticism is one of several areas of uncertainty for teachers'.[79] In 1985 Margaret Mathieson protested that:

> Although practical criticism continues to be well defended, it seems likely that many English teachers' confidence in its value has been badly shaken by persistent expressions of hostility by university teachers.[80]

Colin Evans concluded in *English People* that Richards had left a legacy which was principally valuable because its ideology was centred not on 'theory' but on the support it provided for teaching; it was particularly valuable to teachers in an academic climate which 'before 1929 [...] did not provide any answers to the question of what an English teacher was actually to do in a classroom', but the value of that support for, and belief in, teachers and what they can achieve through the teaching of poetry is perhaps still part of the value of Practical Criticism for the educational system.[81]

Since a good deal of what Richards expounded in *Practical Criticism* seems still to be practised under different names, and since Practical Criticism is obviously still

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79 Scottish Certificate of Education Examination Board, *Scottish Certificate of Education, English on the Higher Grade: Guidance to Teachers on the Marking of Practical Criticism* ([n.p], [1979]), p.1.

80 Margaret Mathieson, *Teaching Practical Criticism: An Introduction* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), p.12.

81 *English People*, p.16.

considered a useful method of teaching as well as a useful method of assessing critical ability, I sent out a set of questions partly about its use to teachers of English in Fife and in Edinburgh. Although the survey was too small to claim that this is representative of teachers of English in Scottish secondary education, some of the questions elicited answers which seem too similar to be purely coincidental. I wanted to know what teachers wanted students to achieve through studying poetry; the answers strongly imply awareness and precise use of language, but in addition some element of citizenship, a sense of responsibility or understanding of others.[82] Comments like 'precise and appropriate use of language', 'how to use language more precisely themselves – even if they are not budding poets' and 'to acquire reading skills' suggest that learning how to read poetry, at least in Scottish schools today, still involves an element of learning how to write about poetry and, consequently, how to write convincingly and competently on any subject. Practical Criticism's tradition of teaching a combined rhetoric and moral sense is reflected in comments like 'appreciation of different perspectives', 'awareness of their own mortality / place in the world / expanded mind', 'to make them think about life and things which concern mankind' and 'a deeper understanding of other people and the world(s) which they inhabit'. As a professor of English at the University of Glasgow wrote in 1983, in a book redolent of Richards's principles of teaching poetry, 'the need to preserve and develop the best in linguistic tradition to some extent devolves upon each one of us [...] the training of a critic is also the training of a citizen'.[83]

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82 The question was worded 'What do you want your students to get from studying contemporary poetry?'.

83 Philip Hobsbaum, *Essentials of Literary Criticism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1983), pp.16-17.

It is the relation between the role of the teacher and the role of the student which still seems to trouble both supporters and critics of Practical Criticism, as in this fairly negative account of Practical Criticism offered recently in a publication for university teachers of English, the *CCUE News*:

> Practical Criticism, at its inception, and in its persistence, is an examinatory model for soliciting unguarded, spontaneous or vulnerable 'personal responses' from students, and correcting them – *always* correcting them – against a standard of true, or in Richardian terms 'normal', reading. The standard itself, whilst it is never declared as such, will be located in the teacher's or examiner's power to censure and to correct.[84]

If students are encouraged to express their developing opinions, to attempt transition, then who has the right to turn those opinions into the material for an evaluation? As Richards suspected in his short story, 'A Reparation' (see Chapter 1), the spotlight tends to turn back on whoever instigates or perpetuates an evaluative method. Yet the foundations of Practical Criticism, in its slightly varying forms, are still considered by supporters and detractors to be laid in secondary education, usually in advance of what is referred to as 'theory' which is tackled at tertiary level. This is attributed to the restrictions of syllabus requirements, teachers' lack of confidence with theory, or the unavailability of course material – or because Practical Criticism's theory of criticism has become so widespread that it is no longer considered to compete on the same level as other theories. Whatever the reasons given, and whatever state of ill health it is reported to suffer, Practical Criticism still forms the first approach to studying poetry for almost all school pupils and has contributed towards the professional status of teachers of

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84 Alan Brown, 'Practical Criticism, Inc.', *CCUE News*, 10 (Winter 1999), 8-9.

English in schools and universities. It follows that, while readers may perceive factors that lie outside the legitimate scope of Practical Criticism, their understanding of what response to poetry entails will be modelled on the lines of a theory of acceptable critical rhetoric.

However, since *Practical Criticism* was intent on defending the academic institution from what Richards called a 'false, professional air', it forces the question of what other sorts of professional education were being practised on the reading public from outside the confines of the academic institution and the space of the exam hall. When Richards noted sceptically that *Practical Criticism* might help poets to increase their sales, by defining 'a set of formulae for "nation-wide appeal"', he was acknowledging that the book-trade had its own professionals and teaching methods, whose aims were bound up with popularity and the increase of book sales.[85] Richard Poirier, discussing the legacy of Pragmatism for American poetry, links the writers he discusses from the outset as having both 'mythologized and explored the virtues of a public poetry and a public philosophy', and simultaneously 'coveted the idea of popularity with a general audience'.[86] The discomfort of the teaching profession with Pragmatism was not only concerned with its effects on the structure of academic institutions, but with its interest in the advertising-speak of 'nation-wide appeal' and the commercial implications of popularity. Richards claimed that *Practical Criticism* could reveal 'the master-keys to [...] the locked chambers and corridors of the theory of

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85 *Practical Criticism*, p.9.

86 Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p.3.

poetry', by providing quantifiably better teaching and criticism of poetry in English.[87] But as Raymond Williams observed in 1976, key words have a tendency to be heavily implicated in the language of material values as well as the supposed detachment of critical theory, and to be shared by people in fields who have 'different immediate values or different kinds of valuation'.[88] By making his set of critical keys, Richards had revealed a corridor between the academic institution and the values of the marketplace, which confronted him with very different kinds of professional education of the reader. In the next chapter, I will discuss what kinds of professional Richards was intent on locking out of his critical practice, and whether their professional influence is still locked out of the practice of reading contemporary poetry.

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87 *Practical Criticism*, p.180.

88 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Croom Helm, 1976), p.9.

Chapter 3

The Devil in the Printing Office: Identifying the Readers of Contemporary Poetry

> *'Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.*
> *'What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?*
> *'I never know what you are thinking. Think.'*
>
> *T. S. Eliot*[1]

> *What was he doing there under the pavement? [...] Not the adding up of figures but a big, long headache of sorting out a highly tangled story.*
>
> *I. A. Richards of T. S. Eliot*[2]

In 1998, a policy document written for the Arts Council of England drew attention to the central problem for any discussion of poetry readers in the marketplace, as the authors of the document saw it: 'the vital relationship in poetry is that between poet and reader', they argued.[3] It is by no means the only important relationship in the process of getting books to readers, or discussing reactions to poetry; yet the links between, for example, distributor and bookseller, or publisher and reviews editor will perhaps seem far less poignant or mystical only because these roles seem more mundane and less likely to elude definition. In this chapter I will discuss some of the ways in which both academic and marketplace observers have tried to define readers and to what end, and describe how the idea of 'reader' continues to elude definition because some contemporary ideas of reading poetry are predominantly to do with silence and listening. I will suggest that,

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1 T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land,* ll. 112-114 (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1922).

2 I. A. Richards, 'On T.S.E.: Notes for a talk at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 29 June 1965' in *T.S.Eliot: The Man and His Work*, ed. by Allan Tate (London: Chatto, 1965), pp.7-15 (p.10).

3 *The Policy for Poetry of the English Arts Funding System*, Arts Council of England, 1998, p.15.

to the booktrade, defining the reader is necessary because it will help to refine distribution and promotion, which are the constant problems associated with selling contemporary poetry. For literary criticism, the definition of the reader plays an important part in a different kind of economy, which David Trotter describes as the paying of a 'silent compliment' by poets to readers. The idea of poetry readers as silent is attractive to literary criticism and to teaching practice, in more ways than one; however, as I will discuss, for readers to remain silent is ultimately seen as an obstacle to both literary and commercial processes.

Yet both critical and commercial attempts to define the reader of poetry are only partly successful, since there is a perception that part of the role of a reader of poetry is to be silent, and even to elude definition. Being a reader of poetry is, in my view, best recognised in the context of this thesis as a kind of listening, rather than either being equated with those who make critical comments on a poem or with having certain tastes and interests which define particular people as readers of poetry. For some examples of the way in which we seek to define poetry readers, I will look at some earlier twentieth-century attempts to define, and even to create, the reader, and also look at the results of readers' responses to the New Generation poetry promotion in 1994. Although their definitions of the reader differ, I will begin by discussing how commercial and academic groups have at least complementary interests in identifying the reader.

In the same way that print publishing in the 1990s was trying to predict the effect of the widespread use of electronic media, print publishing in the 1920s and early 1930s was explicitly concerned with trying to predict how new media, mainly radio, might change the mass behaviour of readers; in each period, a particular concern is shown that

the readers' approach to text may be changing radically in some way, but escaping identification by either academic or commercial approaches. The marketplace was, obliquely, acknowledged in I. A. Richards's *Practical Criticism*, although he indicated that it formed a coherent black market which was necessary for the functioning of both sorts of professional literary economy; it might even be said that publishing was demonised in Richards's criticism for its insistence on combining gentlemanly literary credentials with inquisitive attempts to measure the reader, acting as conman to extract the secrets of the critical confessional. I would suggest that Richards could *afford* to think the marketplace out of the picture, because he was aware that others would be working to put it back in.

It was the publishers of the period, like Geoffrey Faber and Stanley Unwin, who were not content to treat publishing as a self-effacing adjunct to the field of restricted production; they campaigned for a recognition of publishing's cultural importance, arguing that commercial and intellectual profit could be directly related; 'I look upon the book trade [...] as one of the most important functions of a society', wrote Geoffrey Faber in 1934, arguing that '[t]he professional approach to it is, or should be, of interest to others than the professionals'.[4] The argument that those who are not publishers, but for whom books are important, should pay attention to the workings of publishing has, of course, more credence now than in Richards's era; then, when his own doctoral student Q. D. Leavis wrote a daring thesis on the subject of popular fiction's marketing and readership, it caused considerable antagonism between them.[5] Yet poetry reading

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4 Geoffrey Faber, *A Publisher Speaking* (London: Faber, 1934), p.7.

5 See John Sutherland's introduction to Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Pimlico, 2000), pp.v-xxvii (p.x).

has always been given relatively little attention in publishing research because the small size of the poetry market makes it of less interest to mainstream publishers' economic forecasts; in addition, it is often assumed that the poetry reader's proper place is at several removes from commercial pressure, safely and unprofitably in the margins. In the marketplace it is difficult to listen to readers anyway, but the readers of poetry are often assumed to be silent to begin with; finding out what the reader is thinking or doing, uncovering their response to poems and to the contexts in which they read poetry, was in the early twentieth century the job of the booktrade at least as much as the academy.

Geoffrey Faber championed the importance of teaching taste to a readership which was beset with the attractions of new media. As a publisher, Faber was ideally positioned and professionally sanctioned to discuss the reader in the context of the marketplace, and his own university background made him aware of the values of the literary field. Between 1931-1934, Faber gave four lectures about the booktrade to the booktrade, which were published as *A Publisher Speaking*. He introduced them in published form with a combination of zeal and an obvious anticipation that, as a publisher, his opinion would lack intellectual credentials:

> My real reason for publishing these ephemeral papers is that they contain, in however piecemeal and incomplete a form, the elements of a business philosophy. It will be very evident to my readers that I look upon the book trade – the making and distributing of books – as one of the most important functions of a society. A platitudinous statement, no doubt. Let me add a truism to a platitude. This function has to be performed by private individuals at a profit to themselves. Platitude and truism combine – do they not

– to make a very pretty problem, of much more than merely professional interest.[6]

Faber turned the camera on his own field of professional interest and connections, not dissimilar in some ways to the reading Bourdieu provided, much later in the century, of the professional patterns of his own academic field in France. Faber's focus was the place of the individual, largely the reader, within his field of the booktrade; 'individual', and often 'intelligent individual', are phrases which occur again and again. Faber can't resist reminding his listeners and readers that he is a 'university man', and therefore we can see in him a specimen of what Richards described harshly as the 'false, professional' breed who necessarily bridge the gap between academy and marketplace economies of value; by Richards's values, Faber is prepared to sell his (Oxford) learning and, more importantly, the cultural tastes of his milieu. It is clear from Richards's correspondence that this culture and counter-culture is a symbiosis which dislikes reminders of its interdependency, and Faber is a reminder. Particularly, Faber and his ilk were a constant reminder that the definitions of what a reader was were being formed and harnessed by *trade*. 'The reader' was evolving as a thing from which, once properly identified and cultivated, the publisher could reap profit.

Faber called for statistics of sales, not merely publications, arguing that readers must be canvassed as individuals in order to improve reading patterns and maintain the quality of publishers' lists. In the course of four speeches to different audiences (three to the booktrade, and one, interestingly, to the Oxford Union) he necessarily repeated himself, but his repetition is most often to do with a vision of hand-picking, of selecting suitable individuals. Publishers, he argued, should select their authors with care and

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6 Faber, pp.7-8.

passionate commitment. He also insisted that books should be sold by booksellers who would establish themselves as the centre of cultural events in their neighbourhood, as sources of reassurance, reference and authority on books and reading; I would suggest that the kind of confidence and reassurance that he argues would be developed in readers by such ideal booksellers could in fact be seen in parallel with the sort of confidence produced by the relationship between teacher and student in the practice of Practical Criticism. Faber recommended that booksellers should choose 'intelligent', committed assistants, if possible paying them accordingly, and that the bookseller and assistants then handpicked customers for the booktrade equivalent of individual tutorials, softened by comfortable chairs in the shop and a table stocked with new books personally selected by the bookseller. Most tellingly, he keeps talking about the bookseller's education of the reader, and the professional and moral satisfaction to be got from 'moulding' a less intelligent reader. He compares this 'moulding' to the educational system which shaped him:

> Nor should I limit my personal activities to my most intelligent customers. Like my old Oxford tutor, whose greatest artistic pleasure was to turn a pupil of third-class ability into a second-class man, I should particularly aim at persuading my unenterprising customer into breaking new ground.[7]

Faber is always a realist in his education of the public's reading habits. People, he insists, have a finite amount of money and they don't actually want to spend it on books. What readers might *want* to do, and the notion that their wishes should be observed and then coaxed rather than ordered into a new direction, was perhaps a new

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7 Faber, p.32.

notion for some of Faber's audiences. Defining the critic's idea of the reader, for Richards or for later critics interested in response to texts, involved working out an ideal, unworldly reader and an ideal, neutral state in which to engage with a text. Trying to work out the demographics of an existing readership, building up a relationship of control and persuasion with readers, was and still is vital for the booktrade.

Examples of the development and application of the research techniques which can be used are documented in the journal *Poetics* from the University of Tilburg's department of book marketing and sociology, which employs the tools of statistics and computing available to literary sociologists. What these studies of reading and readership can do is to open up a wider definition of what affects reading – a systematic survey of what Genette describes as the paratext surrounding a text – and a wider definition of what legitimate texts can be. A study might focus on genre fiction often discounted from the sort of text appropriate for critical response, or investigate reader behaviour towards poetry compared with another category of text.[8] Reading is equated with people who read, who are in turn equated with a set of responses, and these studies of readership in *Poetics* track significant trends in the behaviour of people who read or purchase books (and in some studies, the behaviour of book professionals, like translators or publishers).

The view remains that the booktrade holds the key to public education and intellectual debate, but is threatened by a hunger for mass sales. In the *Poetics* studies,

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8 See David Hanauer, 'The Genre-specific Hypothesis of Reading: Reading Poetry and Encyclopedic Items', *Poetics* 26 (1998), 63-80. The study asked 38 participants, native Hebrew speakers, to read and recall four encyclopaedic items and four poems in Hebrew. The poems were read more slowly than the encyclopaedic items, but the precise wording of the poems was recalled with greater accuracy.

significance is given to the statistical majority. As Faber did in 1934, the publisher André Schiffrin read his trade in 2000 and came to the apparently contradictory conclusion that 'books have traditionally been the one medium in which two people, an author and an editor, could agree that something needed to be said, and for a relatively small amount of money, share it with the public'.[9] He argues that the marketplace need not fall into the trap of pursuing profit to the exclusion of anything else. However, he acknowledges that profit-led publishing is increasingly encroaching on the publication of books which would bring in smaller profits but would stimulate intellectual activity:

> The threat to such books and the ideas they contain – what used to be known as the marketplace of ideas – is a dangerous development not only for professional publishing, but for society as a whole.[10]

In this situation, the relationship between author and editor is aligned with the sanctity of the poet/reader relationship, in that both are under threat from excessive commercialism; Schiffrin, like Faber, argues that a combination of intellectual and commercial values is still the most effective way of reaching readers.

Poetry publishing, particularly, is still very much seen as a balancing of economic with cultural capital. The research company Book Marketing surveyed the poetry market for the Arts Council of England in 1995, through interviews with publishers based in England and using statistics from the UK market, and reported that:

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9 André Schiffrin, *The Business of Books*: *How International Conglomerates Took Over Publishing and Changed the Way We Read* (London: Verso, 2000), p.171.

10 Schiffrin, pp.171-172.

> It should be noted that several poetry publishers (particularly the larger companies, for whom poetry represents just a small fraction of their book titles and sales), emphasised that poetry was 'different' from other sectors in that sales per title were expected to be quite low (at a rate that might not be acceptable in other sectors). Rather, they maintained their poetry lists, and gave releases marketing support disproportionate to the income they were likely to generate, because of the cultural contribution that publishing poetry is perceived to represent. In other words, there is seen to be an advantage – not calculable in terms of income or profit generated – in being perceived to be sponsoring intellectual and cultural development.[11]

Similarly, definitions of 'the reader' are often produced now either by publishers and members of the booktrade themselves, or by arts funding bodies which promote literature by improving its production.[12]

The enduring problems for poetry publishing, which are distribution and promotion, can seem to be wholly bound up with the publisher's or the poet's address at the same time as having little to do with it. Robin Robertson, in his role as poetry editor at Jonathan Cape, argues that, for a poet, 'I don't think it makes any difference where you're published, as long as you're published well'.[13] Being published well relies on the publisher's efforts to distribute a book to the bookseller, in turn relying on predicting what can catch the attention of the reader. Yet although distribution need not

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11 *The Poetry Book Market: Trade and Consumer Research*, unpublished report prepared for The Arts Council of England by Book Marketing Ltd, August 1995, p.12. The report was made available to me by the ACE Literature Department.

12 Most of the interviews on which the following material is based were first conducted in late 1998 and 1999, but where possible I have contacted interviewees, who have either confirmed that their comments still hold good or have made appropriate changes.

13 Interview with Robin Robertson, London, 14 December 1998.

rely on where the poet comes from, where the publisher is based, or where the bookshops are, all these positionings can still seem to matter to the effective distribution of books, largely because it matters in the promotion of a poet's work. If readers are considered likely to be interested in a poet because of a variety of factors from local readings to nationality, there is a greater likelihood that the poet's collections will be ordered for shops. Poetry sales are particularly caught in a trap dependent on public interest, because sales are so small that – Book Marketing's findings aside – publishers may not often consider it worth spending effort on promoting poetry collections to booksellers, or encouraging newspapers and journals to feature or review books, nor do booksellers want to order larger numbers. In 1999, one buyer for a group of Scottish bookshops commented, '[publishers' reps] can't afford to spend too long discussing the poetry books – they have to fulfil their target for quantity of sales, so they have to concentrate on the mainstream fiction that will get them bigger orders', although he feels now that the efforts to sell poetry to booksellers is improving; because the main poetry lists are currently maintained by a small number of publishers for whom poetry is an important part of their output, he has found that those publishers proportionally put more effort into trying to sell their poetry, even if there are fewer lists now than in 1999.[14] News of planned poetry promotions might encourage buyers to order more copies for interested readers; the other way that publishers and booksellers can keep track of readers' interests is by monitoring what sells. Promotion and distribution therefore depend on the prediction and analysis of sales, and sales constitute the marketplace idea of the reader.

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14 Kenneth Mackenzie, Regional Sales Manager, John Smith & Son (in charge of poetry buying for St Andrews branch and overseeing order figures for other branches), St Andrews, 16 February 1999 and 13 April 2001.

The idea of putting a simple questionnaire, in postcard form, apparently came from a German publisher before the first world war.[15] It is still used by some publishers, but it is expensive to design, produce and collect the questionnaires then analyse the answers. The New Generation promotion in 1994 was a joint effort by the Arts Council of England and other non-profit making arts funding bodies, publishers, the national Waterstone's chain of bookshops and seven publishers, and with so many partners involved it was necessary that the promotion's effects should be monitored as extensively as possible. Questionnaires were inserted in most of the collections which had been chosen for the promotion, and the responses from returned questionnaires were recorded by the Arts Council of England.[16] Providing a sales umbrella which took advantage of the possibility that 'twenty young anythings would have been interesting',[17] the

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15 'Mr Stanley Unwin, in his book *The Truth About Publishing,* reproduces the results of a German experiment carried out in 1914. A German publisher, Diedrich of Jena, had postcards inserted in all his publications asking his readers to let him know what prompted them to buy his the book. The analysis of the answers received showed that advertising played a very small part indeed [...] Far more money is spent now by publishers in newspaper advertising than was spent twenty years ago [...] But no amount of advertising will sell a book, unless people are already prepared to want it' (Faber, p.128). See also Stanley Unwin, *The Truth About Publishing*, 7th edn (London: Allen & Unwin, 1960; first publ. London, 1926), pp.249-250.

16 Of 696 full responses recorded by the Arts Council of England, approximately 50% of the questionnaires had been returned by buyers/recipients of the individual collections by Scottish poets; most mentioned John Burnside's *The Myth of the Twin* (132) , Carol Ann Duffy's *Mean Time* (82), and W. N. Herbert's *Forked Tongue* (75). 81 responses did not specify a particular collection. Only 35 of the 696 respondents rated the influence of the promotion on their poetry reading or buying as 'very considerable', with the majority rating its influence on their poetry interests as 'very little' (236) or 'not at all' (239).

The majority of respondents were aged either 35-54 (42%), and 25-34 (32%); most had occupations classified as AB (508, ie. 49%) or C1 (327, ie. 32%). Respondents did not have to fill in the complete questionnaire, but to qualify for a prize draw they did have to complete details of their address. Of 1035 respondents, 82 (7.9%) noted addresses in Scotland (the majority in Edinburgh and Glasgow).

The database of responses was made available to me by the Arts Council of England and Iain Stewart Consulting.

17 Interview with Gail Lynch, publicist at Colman Getty in charge of the New Generation account in 1994, London, 21 December 1998.

promotion featured twenty collections by poets who were at the time 'under 40 or have published their first collection in the last five years, and are resident in the UK';[18] none of the publishers was based in Scotland, but seven of the poets were claimed particularly by Scottish media as Scottish poets, on grounds of birth or residence.[19] Although it is still impossible to identify all the effects of the promotion, its scale and ambition may have been a recent turning point in the selling of contemporary poetry.[20]

These responses were only from readers who bought the books, and of those only the readers who filled in and sent back the questionnaires; it is difficult to manipulate the questionnaire responses into telling one story or another about what effects the promotion has had overall. For example, although only just over 5% of respondents (35 out of a total of 696) rated New Generation as having had a 'very considerable' effect on their reading and buying of poetry, it would be misleading to use this figure as proof that the promotion has had no further impact on the reading public. The favourite (and unattributed) phrase connected with the promotion, 'poetry is the new rock-and-roll', is still greeted by some with wary recognition more than five years after the promotion, and both negative and appreciative questionnaire responses mentioned the phrase specifically. Some respondents also described the promotion as 'hype', a rare instance

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18 New Generation publicity leaflet, produced by Poetry Society/Colman Getty PR, May 1994.

19 The seven collections chosen by Scottish poets were: John Burnside, *The Myth of the Twin*; Robert Crawford, *Talkies*; Carol Ann Duffy, *Mean Time*; W. N. Herbert, *Forked Tongue;* Mick Imlah, *Birthmarks*; Kathleen Jamie, *The Queen of Sheba*; Don Paterson, *Nil Nil.*

20 Book Marketing reported in *The Poetry Book Market: Trade and Consumer Research* that 5% of adults purchased a poetry book or anthology of poetry in 1994, as opposed to 1% or 2% in 1989-1993 (p.18). The summary of research comments that '[m]ost poetry publishers have experienced some growth in poetry sales over the last few years, although there are signs that this growth may be levelling off now. Publishers put this growth down to the success of the 'New Generation' poets, published in 1994, and to more media tie-ins and attention (including National Poetry Day)' (p.4.).

of poetry being even temporarily connected with the idea of widespread media coverage. As a few respondents also noted, the name of the promotion invokes an academic labelling of a movement; this was taken to be both a bad (insidiously commercial) and good (memorable) thing. It has since occasionally been implied that the name was that of a school of poetry; the introduction to *Other: British and Irish Poetry since 1970* referred to 'Philip Larkin to Craig Raine to Simon Armitage, and [...] their attendant 'collectives' (Movement, Martians, New Generation)'.[21] Gail Lynch, who ran the promotion's publicity at the PR firm of Colman Getty in London, told me that the aim of the promotion had been to publicise poetry more widely than ever before; yet simply acknowledging that the promotion was explicitly attempting to publicise poetry to a wide audience was enough to provoke a high degree of cynicism. She felt the promotion had been 'carefully organised but not cynical'; interestingly, she also felt that the Scottish papers had been more interested in the promotion and more willing to take the risk of devoting extra space on the arts pages.[22] Describing poets as Scottish clearly mattered to the publicity coverage in this case, whether or not it ultimately affected sales.

The New Generation promotion was perhaps the contemporary poetry equivalent of Geoffrey Faber's individual handpicking and persuasion of customers, adapted for a booktrade dominated by chains. Techniques like the house magazines of the larger bookshop chains or the individual notes written by branch staff on personally recommended books are, even in their generalised implementation, a pleasantly

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21 Richard Caddell and Peter Quartermain, eds, 'Introduction: A Fair Field Full of Folk', *Other: British and Irish Poetry since 1970* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998), pp.xv-xxix (p.xv).

22 Gail Lynch, 21 December 1998.

pedagogic way of continuing to expand and build on the taste of bookbuyers. A recent newspaper column, written by a bookseller employed by a large bookshop chain, shows that the Faber principle certainly still applies to the sale of fiction titles:

> We keep a table piled high with [...] perennial best sellers to aid the more unimaginative shopper, but, cunningly, we sneak our favourite novels in among them in the hope someone will buy one by mistake and realise what they've been missing. It's the bookselling equivalent of your parents' theory that children will prefer spinach to chocolate if only they try it once.[23]

Surely if booksellers believe that reluctant customers can be coaxed into trying new novels, then a similar device could be adapted to persuade them into a taste of poetry? But the helpful notes seem to stop at the threshold of the poetry section, situated as it usually is towards the back and upper floors of the bookshop. People who read poetry are not considered by booksellers to be those who require education and development: the customers who need assistance are expected to be the ones grabbing a new novel and wanting to pay quickly, spending less time and more money, so the ground floor and/or front of bookshops are usually given over to their interests. Poetry readers are a breed apart, to whom it seems to be considered presumptuous, unwelcome or simply a waste of staff time to offer advice. These positionings of poetry books and the absence of sales-motivated guidance are the result of a booktrade definition of what the reader is in relation to the reading of poetry. The booktrade undertakes a lot of studies to discover who buys books and how they may then persuade 'the unimaginative shopper' to buy more, but the buyer of poetry is rarely included in their number. Like the quantitative

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23 Michael Knight, 'Bookseller's Eye', *The Guardian*, 19 June 1999, p.11.

analyses published in *Poetics*, the significance of a group of readers is felt by the marketplace to be in direct proportion to the size. However, their relative minority need not stop them from trying to make their opinion felt through sales. As Debbie Taylor argued recently in *Mslexia*, the equivalent of a Fair Trade campaign for books would be far from impossible precisely because of poetry's relatively small market:

> poetry is such a minuscule market that a small number of people can have a very big effect. If every *Mslexia* reader bought the same book, we could create a poetry best-seller.[24]

Although, as the ACE policy document argued, poetry books have an importance for some publishers beyond profit, they are also usually seen has having a finite audience, resistant to expansion. Should the booktrade try to increase the readership or audience base, or simply try to sell more books to an admittedly small readership? There is still an element of responsibility in choice of purchase: poetry, as a small and beleaguered interest in publishing, cannot simply appeal to the mass public, so some members of the booktrade argue that if you care about it, and perhaps also if you wish to demonstrate your taste, you should show support by buying the poetry books.

However, the clout commanded by established poetry lists is still not in direct relation to their sales. When OUP cut its poetry list in late 1998, the furore greeting the decision far outweighed the relatively small fuss made in the UK, certainly in literary journals like the *TLS*, *London Review of Books* and *P.N. Review*, when the Bertelsmann group bought Random House in March 1998 (thereby gaining control over poetry lists

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24 Debbie Taylor, 'The Problem with Poetry', *Mslexia*, 6 (2000), 7-10 (p.10).

like that of Jonathan Cape); American authors were considerably more vocal, protesting to the Federal Trade Commission that for Bertelsmann to control Random House as well as Bantam Doubleday Dell would amount to a monopoly of all US publishing.[25] Subsequently, the *Financial Times* treated Bertelsmann's activities as important because of its mergers with multimedia companies and its plans for large-scale distribution, rather than any changes in Random House which it regarded as a relatively small part of the group. Bertelsmann's influence has since made itself felt most dramatically on multimedia. Initially the application of new media to publishing was seen as likely to have more effect on what was published than has since been recognised: '[a]s all channels of communication expand, greater power is being placed in the hands of content owners, and is increasingly passing to talented individuals who entertain or inform others' was a fairly typical speculation, but voiced early in 1998 before Bertelsmann started to disrupt the status quo.[26] However, new media have not restored control to Geoffrey Faber-like individuals; influence seems limited to the publishers who are part of media groups with access to distribution networks, and these publishers are not encouraged to accumulate cultural capital at the expense of tight profit margins. Of those who remain independent, publishers and booksellers are simply trying to deal with the problems of not controlling any sector of the communications circuit. Unlike the big media groups, the independent bookshops are reliant on book distributors over whom they have little control, and it is distribution which is their most obvious problem in getting poetry books on shelves in the first place.

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25 See Oliver August, 'Writers Oppose Random Deal', *The Times*, 28 April 1998, p.29.

26 John Gapper, 'In Shadow of Uncertainty', *Financial Times: Global Business Outlook*, 13 January 1998, p.4.

Distribution is the least acknowledged, least critically discussed and often held to be the least interesting point of the communications circuit; in the day-to-day professional business of either the critic or the publisher, distribution and the role of the distributor is either a non-event to be passed over in favour of more glamorous topics like authorship or reception, or it is a tedious practical headache. One distributor's sales director argued that 'as well as communicating booksellers comments etc. back to publishers we are pro-active in suggesting what publishers should think of publishing – i.e. what we think would sell [...] we are probably better placed to identify gaps in the market than our publishers'.[27] Yet on the whole distribution is either synonymous with the tiresome area of research between the critically exciting points of production, or the people that the booktrade notices when things go wrong. The issues are no longer anchored to problems of location and transport; one bookseller, working for a small chain of Scottish bookshops, found that in general, 'the location and transport don't matter – the problems are more likely to occur in the warehouses themselves'.[28] The snag, as far as independent booksellers are concerned, is that there are problems in the actual handling of books and processing of orders at a distributor's warehouse.

This is probably precisely because books can now be ordered electronically; this is helpful to the bookseller, who can now make smaller, more frequent orders. Rather than risk tying up a large amount of money in one big order, as was the case when orders had to be made by checking stock manually and then making out and sending individual orders, it is now easier to keep checking computerised stock records and sending off the

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27 Rob Richardson, Signature, e-mail of 20 January 1999.

28 Kenneth Mackenzie, 16 February 1999 & 13 April 2001.

necessary restocking orders on perhaps a weekly basis. But that means that the distributor, already perhaps dealing with a number of publishers who all have a number of perhaps not entirely logical small lists, now has to deal with numerous small, frequent orders from booksellers. At some point, someone physically has to go round the warehouse collecting each book for each order; with so many orders a backlog easily builds up, and as soon as that happens the distributor's reputation for efficiency deteriorates. Where buying is done from the central office of a large chain, solving one of the distributor's main problems, other problems ensue; the buyer might be unaware of all the small poetry presses operating in the regions where the chain has shops, or they are aware of the presses but cannot afford to risk buying even one or two copies of a small imprint's latest poetry publication for each shop when they can only predict that customers in some regions are likely to be interested. Size of a chain does not necessarily mean that it has more margin for error when ordering: each branch of a chain can little more afford 'dead' stock from a speculative order than any independent bookshop could.

The identification of the reader as part of promotion and so of distribution ensures the reader's place in what Robert Darnton calls the 'communications circuit'.[29] Darnton's essay, 'What is Book History?', proposed a structural template of what the book trade looks like which, he argued, any book historian could adapt to their own historical specialism. For those academics who *are* interested in distribution, whom Darnton describes as a passionate undercover brotherhood – bibliographers subverting their trade from a leisurely fine art to the practise of mass sociology – distribution is seen

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29 Robert Darnton, 'What Is Book History?', *The Kiss of Lamourette*, pp.107-135 (first publ. in *Daedalus*, Summer 1982, 65-83), p.112.

as a part of the whole field of studying books. Trade and readership are tied to each other in a constant circulation of books, but the model implies that distribution is composed of two neat, arrow-shaped units of study. They fit snugly between 'printers: compositors, pressmen, warehousemen' and 'Booksellers: wholesalers, retailer, peddler, binder' and are only visible in the persons of 'shippers; agent, smuggler, entrepot keeper, wagoner etc', proposing distribution as an abstract suggestion of pure movement between professions. It also suggests individual units working away at their part in the chain, which perhaps does ring true for Darnton's period of mainly eighteenth century study; but as he cautions in its application to a specific period, the model does not wholly explain the twentieth-century conglomerate mass, in which one unit can be directly influenced by another several down the line simply because they are owned by the same parent company. What it does provide is the reassurance that at heart, everyone engaged in publishing history is pursuing broadly the same ideal, of 'fleshing out' this universal skeleton with their own research findings; the hunt through publishing archives can provide the excitement for the reader which Darnton argues is gradually lost in the constant critical re-evaluation of texts.

John Sutherland's 1988 article, 'Publishing History: A Hole At the Centre of Literary Sociology', criticised Darnton for this approach. He argued that publishing history encompasses so many different disciplines that few scholars are yet equipped with the skills to analyse the material properly; although he praised Darnton's gift for uncovering the excitement of publishing history, he also criticised Darnton's admissions of unwillingness and even inability to indulge in a 'macroquantifying' analysis of the archives he discovers. However, the most interesting feature of the article is presented

as a relative aside. Sutherland suggested that Darnton's publication of the most readable bits of a research project was premature, and largely a canny career move:

> In retrospect, his advocacy of the cause of publishing history will be seen as a justified career manoeuvre by which he has arrived at where he really wanted to be. [Publishing history's] 'riot of interdisciplinarity' was, transitionally, a useful liberation. Nevertheless, Darnton's contribution to the future of publishing history has been profound; if only in the PR sense of glamourizing what was previously unglamorous.[30]

That passing observation of 'only [...] PR' is an interesting observation from someone advocating methodical research into every aspect of book publication; at what point does the promotional ephemera of PR become part of the valuable material evidence of the publishing historian? But it is more telling that in an article on the formation of a discipline, the career of one of the protagonists is acknowledged as being a significant factor. Any new discipline would be subject to scholarly disagreements, the subsequent insecurity of individual and collective careers of its exponents, and the resulting frantic search for ideological coherence as a solution to both problems. Sutherland appears to accept the motivation of developing a career quite stoically, but is troubled by what he describes as 'the lack of any coherent theory'. Like Richards's forging of a theory from the different disciplines whose status he wanted English Literature to emulate, Sutherland calls for all the different disciplines involved in publishing history to be brought together in a theoretical fortification. This does seem to assume that a new brand of theory should take the form of a rigid structural framework which can capture the elusive essence of

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30 John Sutherland, 'Publishing History: A Hole at the Centre of Literary Sociology', *Critical Inquiry* (Spring 1988), 574-589 (p.579).

what publishing history might be and so, eventually, help to define publishing history's benefit to the reader of literary texts. The structural framework, for contemporary publishing history, increasingly seems based on the electronic media more widely applied as a new tool of distribution than a medium for poetry; as the 1998 ACE policy document confidently stated, 'poetry via the new technologies will offer alternative methods of distribution but the printed poem will remain at the heart of the poetry world'.[31]

The new media are still perceived as bringing about changes in metaphors of reading rather than making direct changes on poetry sales, although the metaphors of reading extend to other sorts of texts. The editors' introduction to *Literature in the Market Place* (1995), for example, begins in a mood similar to Sutherland's by regretting the lack of a theoretical flag. But they then identify a problem with the general nature of a model like Darnton's, which Sutherland did not treat. Having begun to describe publishing by means of a model which tries to include every part of a generalised production process, Darnton's early model of publishing history cannot then show new factors appearing, as they do in the constantly changing nature of the field. John Jordan and Robert Patten also argue that, because different factors in the study of literary markets assume new emphases depending on each period of study, there is still 'no comprehensive paradigm of a print culture'.[32] They argue that what publishing history

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31 *The Policy for Poetry of the English Arts Funding System*, Arts Council of England, 1998, p.15. For an introduction to poetry written with electronic media, see the special issue of the design journal *Visible Language*, 30 (1996).

32 John O. Jordan and Robert L. Patten, 'Publishing History as Hypertext', in *Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth Century British Publishing and Reading Practices* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), pp.1-18 (p.1).

as a discipline needs is 'not more of the linear paradigms of production', but:

> conceptions of the activity of producing [...] books that decenter the principal elements and make them interactive and interdependent; *publishing history [...] as hypertext* [my italics].[33]

There are, of course, two senses of 'hypertext' or 'hypertextuality', closely related, and both to do with the adaption of academic thought and vocabulary to new media in an example of a new medium, if not instigating a new pattern of thought, then facilitating its explanation. The first and most widespread use is in indicating that the reader/listener should receive several closely-linked suggestions which appear to be so contradictory that they attempt to cancel one another out, but which reveal a new fascination when thought of, paradoxically, in tandem. For example, Steven Connor's assertion that evaluation compels us to 'think together' absolute values and the imperative to value could be presented as a hypertextual argument; you can develop the skill of visualising their parallel possibilities, with the ease of clicking on a link from one website to another, without your cultural memory crashing. However, the second use of 'hypertextual' is to express the growing conviction visible in these articles that book historians investigate a linear history of production then present it, in all its stages, as a parallel suspension which their readers can browse through at will. This is similar to the readings of the marketplace visualised by Benjamin in the *Arcades Project;* this second use is analogous with perceptions of the contemporary anthology which have been influenced by the possibilities of the full-text database. Naturally enough, publishing historians are suggesting that reading has its own theories which are initiated by its media.

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33 Jordan and Patten, p.11.

Moreover, publishing historians also argue that a medium can influence not only the presentation of a text, but the writers of texts. For example, Claire Hoertz Badaracco's book on the commercial development of typography and its influences on Modernism is a fascinating account of how artform and sales become codependent through a medium. She shows how much of American printing in the early twentieth century – previously enviably cheap but of correspondingly poor quality – benefited from enlightened sales initiatives. Badaracco also suggests that the reading public, with the era of modernism and new typography, entered and eventually became the products of 'the business imagination'. And finally, she claims that during this period, certainly in American printing and publishing, publicists began to be distinct agents in the communications circuit:

> Publicists routinely claimed that every artist, poet, type designer and book publisher needed an audience. The publicist was in the business of providing one. Writers and printers could educate readers about style by example, they argued, and thus persuade the public of the value of printed goods. Of course, it was the common reader who ultimately determined whether or not the goods were worth buying and at what price [...] Meanwhile academic theorists, literary critics, and other 'authorities' developed theories of mass communication and public-opinion engineering and an aesthetic rationale for the popularity of the plain style. Phrases like 'new journalism', 'new criticism', and 'reception analysis' involving the 'ethnography of audience' all grew out of the social currents that these campaigns reflected.[34]

In other words, for the American field of production she identifies criticism as *secondary*

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34 Clare Hoertz Badaracco, *Trading Words: Poetry, Typography and Illustrated Books in the Modern Literary Economy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p.193.

to and dependent on the counter-culture of trade, rather than an unacknowledged codependent.

Publishing historians, like booksellers and publishers, or like teachers and critics, are happier the more it is possible to identify the links in the book chain. The evasiveness of any link in a communications circuit such as the one proposed by Darnton, particularly the reader, causes suspicion; when the reader is evading analysis by such research techniques as are feasible, then publishing and scholarship want to know what the reader is doing instead. Critics and teachers, as well as the publishing marketplace, share a mistrust of the reader who becomes obstinately lost in silent reading. They need to know when and how the reader can be persuaded into participating in critical discussion of a text, or buying another book. Frequently the unresponsive silence is taken as defiance, apathy, or even heroic subversion of the system. A silent contemplation of the ambiguities of a text is considered the aspirational state for reading, but if it does not eventually result in a reaction from the person reading, there is collective panic.

Criticism which focuses on what readership might be is considered to be part of the broad church of reader-response. One of the dominant arguments put forward by reader-response critics is that the reader is desperately trying to listen to the multiple voices of a text, including voices which speak in regional or professional dialects. This is particularly the case for those listening to poetry written in the 1990s, and necessarily those trying to listen out for voices which counterpoint more pervasive broadcasting; Robert Crawford's *Identifying Poets* (1993) would be just one example of critical interest in the many senses of 'voice' and listening. However, like a short story by George Mackay Brown in which the restoration of a parish church prompts a fabular

comparison of message and medium, some of these poets use churches to voice the metaphor of the reader/listener beset by different media.[35] Churches mirror lyric structures which convey intensity of purpose, but they also represent boundaries beyond which it is difficult or even forbidden to pursue readers; anything could be happening to the concept of the listening reader behind their doors. For example, it could be that the roles of reader, translator and poet are all apparent:

> Poems are custom-built churches in which the poem's own voice – or the poet's, if he or she mistakenly conflates the two – can sing freely; but one so specifically calibrated to maximise the resonant potential of that voice, that another voice, upon entering the same space, is almost guaranteed to fall flat.[36]

The other voice which Don Paterson introduces here is that of the translator, which he acknowledges cannot, and should not, be other than an inventively responsive counterpoint to the original; what is most important here is that a poet is talking about a work in which he is required to sing the parts of attentive reader at the same time as those of creative writer and, necessarily, critic and interpreter. He goes on to discuss the pointlessness of trying to preserve in translation the structural features of the written space as they were constructed in the original language, but he retains the metaphor of the poem/building as common space for listening. Yet the afterword is addressed to people or readers or listeners whose collusion is necessary for such a solid structure to be agreed on: an audience is being invited to define itself, because otherwise the work remains in equal parts incomplete and unheard.

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35 See George Mackay Brown, 'A Treading of Grapes', *A Time to Keep* (London: Hogarth Press, 1969), pp.63-76.

36 Don Paterson, 'Afterword', *The Eyes* (London: Faber, 1999), pp.56-7.

That acknowledgement of the need for collusion is particularly characteristic of the relationship between a reader and a poem; it is a compliment which, as David Trotter's study of the construction of modern readers of poetry suggests, is paid by author to reader as an invitation to join a sympathetic elite. Trotter's analysis of *The Making of the Reader* presents a tradition within twentieth century poetry in English of constructing readership through text; more accurately, of constructing the boundaries of a metaphorical space which somehow prompts appropriate reading. He charts the development of the 'common reader' – the limited number of readers produced by a similar education and background whose common ground with the writer would guarantee that they would be able to respond to textual clues in a predictable way. He also identifies the collapse of this gentlemen's agreement and the strategies developed to counteract the 'suspicion that the reader sometimes does not respond at all [...] a suspicion which has been written into the recent history of American, English and Irish literature by a perpetual concern with the disappearance of the Common Reader'.[37] Trotter firmly situates the preoccupation with the problem of the unresponsive or incompetent reader as at its revolutionary height in the work of Eliot and Auden and influenced and recorded by critics like Leavis. Most importantly, he puns the phrase 'the silent compliment', which describes the generosity of the interpretive leeway offered by the writer to the reader, with 'the silent complement'; the reader silently returns the compliment by supplementing the text with interpretation, which Trotter allegorises as the marginalia accruing on a text.

As Trotter suggests, the idea of the silent reader does not sit easily in reader-

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37 David Trotter, *The Making of the Reader: Language and Subjectivity in Modern American, English and Irish Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p.2.

response criticism, nor in its German precursor, reception theory. In an introduction to reader-response, Andrew Bennett describes the habitual perception of reading:

> Reading is seen as an escape – a removal of the self from the world, or [...] a dissolution of the borders of self, world and book. The reader is characteristically seen as isolated, and political questions – concerned with social relationships and intersubjective structures of power – are understood to be arbitrary interruptions of a private activity.[38]

Bennett sorts reader-response refutations of this view into two camps. In the first, 'readers are historically or socially constructed' which has 'necessitated a recognition of the politics and history of reading' and argues that the reader's historical and social situation are all-important.[39] The second group, however, dispenses with the stability of context altogether, even a debatable context, arguing for:

> a problematization of the very concept of 'reading' and 'the reader', a recognition not only that readers are different from one another, but that any individual reader is multiple, and that any reading is determined by difference.[40]

He puts into this category critics like Steven Mailloux, whose emphasis on a rhetorical model to cope with the constantly shifting interpretations and definitions of 'the reader' seems to be a subversive complement to the training of the reader in the image of an authoritatively mutual critical response, such as Trotter identifies.[41] Yet whether the

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38 Andrew Bennett, ed., *Readers and Reading* (Harlow: Longman, 1995), p.5.

39 Bennett, p.4.

40 Bennett, p.4.

41 See for example Steven Mailloux, ed., *Rhetoric, Sophistry, Pragmatism* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995).

reader suggests rhetorical difference or a perpetuation of sameness in critical response, it is taken for granted that where a reader is visible, a response will follow: the silent reader is bound to be engaged in constructing some sort of response, even if it is not audible, since in the eyes of reader-response critics that is the inevitable reaction to reading a text.

Trade studies show that when the reader is defined by what they purchase, the definition of 'reader' is best explained by establishing consistency in taste, consistency in social and professional characteristics, and thereby consistency or predictability of purchasing habits, in the person who reads. For example, a feasible question might be about the purchaser's job, age or newspaper-reading habits, like the questions asked of people buying books in the 1994 New Generation promotion.[42] These questions, of course, were partly to justify the expenditure of the promotion and were designed to show whether a sufficiently wide cross-section of the community had been attracted to poetry books through the use of public funding. They are also significant in that they argue that people will, consistently, read particular kinds of book or be loyal to the same newspaper: social identity is correlated with readerly behaviour and the correlation will remain consistent and – by implication – divisive. These definitions and concerns, academic and commercial, are self-perpetuating because they have become part of what many of those who read consider to be the expectations of becoming a creditable reader. For example, Megan Benton's article on the developing iconography of the book in American advertising shows just how much books feature in advertisements for other

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42 Questions 10 & 11 were on the respondent's newspaper reading, question 20 on age group and question 21 on occupation. (New Generation Competition questionnaire leaflet, produced by the Arts Council of England, 1994).

goods or services; they provide an evocation of introspective and cultured calm in images of home life, and they even 'lurk discreetly in computer advertisements [...] lending credence and cultural legitimacy to their electronic offspring'.[43] She argues that the person who reads – or at least holds a book in his or her hand – has increasingly been shown as contemplative and reflective, desirably cultured and perhaps a little conservative. Books really do furnish a room, particularly a silent room, because every reader has been trained to read a lot simply into their presence.

When readers trained in this atmosphere of academic and commercial expectations become teachers, it is reasonable that they should still feel that silent reading is the most desirable kind of reading. They are likely to consider that the practical requirements of silent, attentive reading in crowded classrooms, and the necessity of preparing student readers to become articulately examinable critics, makes silent reading impossible – and perhaps all the more mystical and desirable, with the privilege of silent reading incidentally becoming a reward for competence. Some Scottish teachers of English at secondary level, when I asked them about their use of silent reading in the classroom, answered in general that they preferred to read poems aloud and discuss them with the class or in groups. One commented that 'the more able the pupil, the more I would encourage silent work on poetry'; by implication, the pupil in this situation goes through a process which initially involves reading and perhaps commenting on the poems aloud. The less able pupil would be encouraged to articulate their response aloud until they satisfied the teacher that they were sufficiently able as critics to be rewarded by working in silence. Training contemporary readers of poetry therefore seems to use

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43 Megan Benton, 'Sizzle and Smoke: Iconography of Books and Reading in Modern American Advertising', *Publishing History*, 38 (1995), 77-90 (p.88).

reading in silence as an aspirational state for reading poetry, but a state which is often difficult to establish in a classroom situation. The first comment implies that silent work is a reward, earned by demonstrating the pupil's proficiency in reading and commenting aloud on poems. A second comment shows awareness of how these aims – silent reading as aspiration and reward – require the development of the reader's role in elusive and unmonitored silence:

> It is essential that somehow [silence] is achieved, if literature is to become important for anyone. A melting fusion of writer, text, reader, context, language.[44]

'Melting fusion' suggests the blurring of roles which can occur in that silence. Taken in conjunction with the previous comment, this indicates that by working in silence the reader in training either eludes or is subsumed by the context or language which would normally simply define them.

This suggestion that 'the reader' is, by definition, impossible to define when he or she is in a natural state of silence is reiterated by Andrew Bennett in his discussion of reader-response criticism, when he acknowledges the suggestion of some reader-response critics that if the reader cannot be identified by systematic scrutiny, then the reader should simply be defined as impossible to define, and adds:

> [t]hat the question 'Who reads?' has been answered in so many ways, then, may be indicative of the instability or mobility of what we call 'the reader'.[45]

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44 Questionnaire sent to secondary school teachers in Fife and Edinburgh during March-June 1999.

45 Bennett, p.2.

Instability is a logical conclusion to draw from the number of disparate solutions, yet it could also be partly that whoever or whatever the reader is simply involves a multiplicity of identities, rather than the implication of defective insecurity inherent in 'instability'. Bennett's conclusion is that reader-response critics assert that *either* the reader can be removed from their context but that context cannot be eradicated from the reader, *or* 'that any individual reader is multiple, and that any reading is determined by difference'.[46]

This second answer, an opportunity for definition and response in difference, is similar to Garrett Stewart's discussion of the nineteenth century novel and its successive readers:

> It is not the mimetic model, therefore, which best grasps the relation between a text and its time but rather the rhetorical one: the model that covers exactly *the space between*, its negotiated traversals, its bizarre interchanges.[47]

The confines of the space in which reading is allowed to take place – the structure of church or library in which reading is permitted – may be of less importance than the progress of the silent act of reading inside, but Stewart argues that those confines are, inadequately, all we have:

> The noun reader (when designating more than a library user or book purchaser) escapes the concept of plurality and hence the hold of quantification. This is why there are no statistics that can genuinely round up the Victorian (or any other) general reader. It is

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46 Bennett, p.4.

47 Garrett Stewart, *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p.6.

> also why any social history of the so-called reading public is not a study of the reader, let alone a reader, until it is informed by precisely that phenomenological detour, routed by language, along whose grooves, when people read, readers emerge, generated in process.[48]

The reader has to be trusted to continue within those confines the creative, rhetorical reading they have been trained to do, and Stewart continues:

> The reader is a drastic abstraction of the self, spirited away from self-identity by text, a subjective construction spun out from moment to moment by the subvocal rematerialization of the graphic signifiers on the read, not just opened, page. Reading voices, if you will. Reading also opens space. It thereby creates an occupied zone between text and interpretation whose terrain is too often reconnoitred from an aerial and hazy distance. The details of rhetorical emplacement are the first to go in the resulting blur.[49]

These are ultimately text-centred criticisms – or at least, critical stances which are voiced within the text-centred process of academic criticism. The function of reading subordinates its context and the identity of the person who is practising that function, ready instead to act on whatever creative opportunities are suggested by the 'voices' heard or read. The idea of the reader as an identifiable *noun* is, as Garrett Stewart argues, an unhelpful way of defining the concept of 'reader', and is perhaps the result of wishful thinking on the part of the booktrade researcher or publisher; the misleading conclusions of statistical analysis are equally problematic in discussing the readers of

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48 Stewart, pp.9-10.

49 Stewart, p.10.

contemporary poetry. With persuasion worthy of William James, Stewart adroitly co-opts these problems as ammunition for the primacy of text-centred criticism but, more interestingly, at the same time implies the redefinition of 'reader' as a *verb*, with its seductive possibility of critical focus on a voicing, opening, occupying, active reader.

However, Stewart emphasises the primacy of the text perhaps because it seems that by redefining the reader purely as function – similar to Steven Connor's differentiation between the *imperative to value* and the sedimental *values* which atrophy critical response – the critic falls prey to a stasis of the undefinable and silent space of reading. How to analyse what lies beyond statistical definitions of readerly behaviour, if the act of reading relies on remaining as a silent listener? Don Paterson's explanation of the principles he used as co-poet, translator, and critic of Machado's poetry emphasises that all these roles – which could be easily fitted into Darnton's multi-period model of literary production – can now be conventionally undertaken in contemporary poetry by one person. Darnton's model seems too general for the discussion of contemporary poetry's readership because it assumes that each role in the production of a text and its afterlife can be equated with a different individual, leaving no opportunity for the particularly smaller scale production of poetry in which a writer may easily also be acting as publisher, critic, distributor and editor, for his own work and for others'. The attractive feature of Darnton's model for my purposes is that it relies on a circulation, of texts and of responsibility for their production: but by allegorising each role as a separate person, that emphasis on movement ironically produces an ultimately limiting model for the definition of the reader. The reader must be in a silent space in order to listen to the centralised ambiguities and conflicting voices of a text. Yet if the

allegorical notion of 'reader' is taken literally as the role of an individual, then not only must reading take place in silence, but the role of the silent, listening reader can only be seen as isolated: if 'reader' is a person and not a function which can operate concurrently with other functions of production, then the silent reader is obstructing both the economy of production and the economy of critical response.

At this point, we can refer briefly to I. A. Richards's reaction to Eliot's *Ara Vos Prec*, mentioned in Chapter 2. Richards had been so impressed that he had lost himself in the isolation of silent reading, in the middle of the market square in Cambridge; he temporarily allowed the book to affect him purely as a silent reader, describing himself as 'lost', before he rediscovered his responsibilities as a critic (which were to articulate to others his opinion of the text).[50] Eliot's poetry can still routinely silence readers who are being trained within the evolved parameters of Practical Criticism, although they may later go on to articulate professional critical responses to a canonic poem like *The Waste Land*. Their training still depends on a recognition that it is impossible, if not presumptuous, to locate any interpretation more finite than the central ambiguities of the text; the process of its reading can only be the act of listening to an interpretive clamour of 'Speak to me' or 'What are you thinking of?'. Currently, any person who reads a text is still asked to equate *making a response* with *stopping being a reader*; to respond to a text, by making any kind of comment on the experience of reading it, is to start carrying out the function of a critic. The voices of critics or sociological statisticians or book historians which claim that ultimately there will always be something indefinable

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50 I. A. Richards, 'On T.S.E.: Notes for a talk at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 29 June 1965' in *T.S.Eliot: The Man and His Work*, ed. by Allan Tate (London: Chatto, 1965), pp.7-15 (p.8).

about 'the noun reader' are also protecting their own reading function from what is seen as the invasive analysis of a silent reading space.

A more recent reader of readership, Alberto Manguel, describes the muted conversation in which the readers in a library, in company with other critical voices, exchange silent reading for (barely) audible response.

> The readers at the [Biblotecia Ambrosiana, Milan] spoke to one another from desk to desk; from time to time someone would call out a question or a name, a heavy tome would slam shut, a cartful of books would rattle by. These days, neither the British Library nor the Bibliothèque Nationale is utterly quiet; the silent reading is punctuated by the clicking and tapping of portable word-processors, as if flocks of woodpeckers lived inside the book-lined halls. Was it different in the days of Athens [...]? Perhaps they didn't hear the din; perhaps they didn't know that it was possible to read in any other way.[51]

He evidently regrets the loss of companionable discussion between readers, now replaced by the solipsistic sound of laptops. But this isn't the sound of silent reading; it's the sound of comradely discussion, a rhetorical model for reading the activity of readers rather than the act of reading. The silent space he describes, in this case of large research libraries, is made up of a community of quiet readers whose readerly behaviour supports and perpetuates itself but does not explain the sort of silence which obstructs either cultural or commercial capital. But are there any ways out of reading the silence of reading, apart from a devaluation of what Stewart calls the rhetorical model of criticism?

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51 Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), p.44.

Firstly, the examples of Roland Champagne and Maurice Blanchot suggest solutions to the endless rhetorical distractions. Champagne suggests elevating the isolation of the reader so that the reader is innocent of the time they have spent (or lost). Reading Barthes, he presents the moment of understanding reading as a finite, but extended, experience, and also as one clearly based on a definition of reading very similar to that of the reader trained in Practical Criticism:

> A certain timeless and elusive quality enters into language at the point when an exchange of information occurs. That quality is analogous to the experience of listening to a good piece of music that produces ephemeral delight.[52]

Although his study of Barthes is entitled *Redefining the Myths of Reading*, this particular myth has escaped pretty well unchanged, accruing mythicality as it does so. He expects that ambiguity will be located at the moment of fully understood reading, since ambiguity is still central to the competently trained reader, and still helps to gloss over the issue of exchange. At the centre of Champagne's reading of Barthes as a reader there is also the warning of 'ephemerality'; a reminder that the reader only has a limited time to revel in ambiguity before being required to comment on what they have heard/read. While Barthes's description of his act of reading is apparently quoted to show reading at its most defiantly uncommunicative, and also innocently unaware of the length of time spent, the interpreter of the description shows how to put a value on the act of silent reading as seen from the outside. The passage concludes Champagne's argument for analogy between hearing music and understanding text, showing Barthes as the reader

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52 Roland Champagne, *Literary History in the Wake of Roland Barthes: Redefining the Myths of Reading* (Birmingham, Alabama: Summa Publications, 1984), p.62.

of *Roland Barthes* being overtaken completely by his reading, but framed by Champagne's reading of the divorce between reader and communication of what they have read:

> Barthes himself captured that experience when he spoke of listening to tapes of his earlier piano-playing: 'When I listen to myself having played – after an initial moment of lucidity in which I perceive one by one the mistakes I have made – there occurs a rare kind of coincidence: the past of my playing coincides with the present of my listening, and in this coincidence, commentary is abolished: there remains nothing but the music.[53]

Reading Champagne reading Barthes, who is reading himself through writing the autobiography of his reading, is like grappling with a set of Russian dolls for the first time with no instructions. But somehow, each of these readers expects that the act of reading he tries to analyse will be hidden within his own act of reading, and expects that he will have to perform some definitive breaching of the isolation surrounding his subject before he can extract the smaller but distinct reader inside. This increasingly impenetrable mythology of the isolated reader, who must be protected as well as observed, is visible in part in the reluctance of poets to talk about the process of writing and its subsequent rereading and revising, or of those who read professionally to explain how the process of their reading results in particular choices or criticisms.

The similarity between the risk-taking reader and the writer rereading and revising work is more easily seen in comparison with Maurice Blanchot's risk-taking writer in *The Space of Literature*. He reserves completely solitary reading for the writer

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53 Champagne, p.62.

alone, arguing that the solitude demanded by the work for its own reading becomes the frustrating impenetrability which prevents the writer from a rereading as intimate as his first writing, forcing further writing. (What Blanchot's writer actually revises is the intangible corpus of his perpetually untranslatable 'work', rather than the individual and necessarily failed attempts to communicate it: 'What the writer aims at is the work, and what he writes is a book'.)[54] He begins by co-opting the read work into complete solitude, and argues that the reader necessarily follows:

> The work is solitary: this does not mean that it remains uncommunicable, that it has no reader. But whoever reads it enters into the affirmation of the work's solitude, just as he who writes it belongs to the risk of this solitude.[55]

The reader must be therefore demonstrate an ability to understand the idea of solitude, to undertake isolation, before carrying on in the normal way to read, understand and then escape into the company of communication. It is perhaps the writer who is left in the role of the isolated reader:

> The writer cannot abide near the work. He can only write it; he can, once it is written, only discern its approach in the abrupt *Noli me legere* which moves him away, which sets him apart or which obliges him to go back to that 'separation' which he first entered in order to become attuned to what he had to write. So that now he finds himself as if at the beginning of his task again and discovers again the proximity, the errant intimacy of the outside from which he could not make an abode.[56]

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54 Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. and intro. by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982; first publ. Paris, 1955), p.23.

55 Blanchot, p.22.

56 Blanchot, p.24.

Blanchot later reiterates the idea of understanding as movement across a divide of isolation, analogous with 'what happens when what you see, although at a distance, seems to touch you with a gripping contact, when the manner of seeing is a kind of touch', when seeing is *'contact'* but 'at a distance' – *Noli me tangere.*[57] The writer can only follow a pattern of attempting to read his own work but the isolated space in which he attempts to read it becomes a site of repeated failure – *'Noli me legere'*. What differs essentially in Blanchot's reading of his own reading from Champagne's reading of Barthes is that he identifies this failure as the spur towards creativity or regeneration of the writer. The reader is aligned with the function of writer, and the writer is the work's first reader, but a gambling of risk and return, playing with an idea of a time-linked index of the value of reading and understanding, can only be undertaken by a writer. Blanchot's reader is merely a pale imitation of his writer, a mimetic figure rather than the productively-distanced rhetorical function. Why is it that taking risks with the 'errant intimacy' between silent reading and other roles becomes a creative and even profitable risk if it is identified in the function of writer, but a negative risk in the role of the reader?

Adam Phillips suggests that what solitude offers is a space in which risk-taking is controlled, in which new ideas can be tested in relatively nonjudgemental privacy. Similar to Blanchot's reading of the recurrent creative attraction for the writer of solitary literary space, Phillips argues that solitude is not a risk in itself but a space in which an individual can experiment, particularly with changing definitions of themselves. He uses the example of an adolescent's coming to terms with mental and physical change:

One way the adolescent differentiates himself, discovers his capacity for solitude – for

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57 Blanchot, p.32.

> a self-reliance that is not merely a triumph over his need for the object – is by making and taking risks. He needs, unconsciously, to endanger his body, to experiment with the representations of it, and he does this out of the most primitive form of solitude, isolation.[58]

Phillips goes on to challenge a paper by D.W. Winnicott which discusses the similarity of the creative artist's behaviour to that of an adolescent, suggesting that Winnicott's 'ordinary' individual is envious of the artist's ruthlessness. In this context, then, a refusal to come out of the reader's isolation is a gesture towards creativity, but prolonged isolation and creative reading are only achieved at great expense. (The solitary and persistently silent reader is seen as putting himself or herself above the 'ordinary' reader who obediently returns from reading to have their understanding of the text validated.) If definitions of readership such as Champagne's or Blanchot's were to persist in equating 'reader' with an allegorical, risk-taking figure rather than a function, then they run the risk of analysing the function of reading as if psychoanalysing the person who reads.

In silent reading, the function of reading is to experiment and change identities – Stewart's 'drastic abstraction of the self, spirited away from identity by the text'; the quandary of the reading space is how to deal with the translation or exchange of these identities. If the function of reader were analogous to the person reading, this would be a choice between *either* creativity and a continued freedom to switch between functions or identities, *or* a validation of the critic's translation of what he or she has heard, a

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58 Adam Phillips, 'On Risk and Solitude', in *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored* (London: Faber, 1993), pp.22-39 (p.26).

validation of critical worth which can be exchanged for another role in the various circles of production. Perhaps in rejecting the limits of this definition of 'reader', it is possible to do both. But can it be done in any established approach to reading which retains the principles of Practical Criticism? Recent critical writing by poets and academics indicates that there may be ways out of the impasse, and three examples follow in the concluding pages of this chapter. Tom Leonard suggests opting out of the academic system which relies on these patterns of exchange and value. He reads the grading and examination of pupils as an arbitrary authority given to the teachers who are 'trained to possess the code that Literature comes in' and the demands of the examination and validation process are comprehensively instilled:

> [g]eneration after generation has been 'taught' that a poem itself has as it were to pass an exam before it can earn the right to be called a poem in the first place; but only those people who have passed exams about poems, can give a new would-be poem the new exam necessary in order to decide whether it is a poem or not.[59]

Leonard's focus is not the quandary between remaining in the reading role or seeking validation through response, but when this quandary highlights for a student the difference between 'the code' and their own experience.[60] In his writing on this working of injustice he tends not to put forward solutions to providing a better system – since his argument is usually that the solutions have been put forward repeatedly and ignored –

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59 Tom Leonard, ed., 'Introduction', *Radical Renfrew: Poetry from the French Revolution to the First World War* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990), pp.xvii-xxxv (p.xix).

60 Colin Evans's study of 'English people' includes a comment from a lecturer whose Birmingham accent at school was felt to be such a class-related obstruction to his future career in the academic system that elocution lessons were suggested. See Colin Evans, *English People: The Experience of Teaching and Learning English in British Universities* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993), p.204.

but suggests that reading could instead boycott the system. Reading could be validated by the person reading as a measure of their own authenticity:

> [t]he first right that ought to be maintained in the presence of a work of art is the right to silence, though this right to silence is precisely what the present educational system attempts to reject. A 'candidate' of course though still does have the right to be silent if he or she so chooses: after all, a person can choose to have Nothing Out Of Ten, which is the going rate for silence on the educational free market. But the most worthwhile criticism that I have listened to has always come from someone who has felt the necessity, after a while, retrospectively to examine the nature of the silence to which they have been reduced.[61]

Self-validation might fit into a reading of post-modernist criticism as a theoretical stance developed to consolidate a revolutionary new culture.[62]

A second solution is to remain within the academic system, but justify the primacy of the listening reader in terms of theoretical stance: bewilderingly (as seems to be his intention), Thomas Docherty advocates elusiveness not as a boycott of value but simply as a way of remaining a reader. *Post-* the modernism of Richards's appropriation of Eliot, he suggests that the postmodernist should not even try to escape from the silence in which the reader is currently trapped: the impulse to stop readers' silent listening to a text is purely a vestige of Modernist 'demystification'. Silence as a

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61 Tom Leonard, 'Poetry, Schools, Place' in *Reports from the Present: Selected Work 1982-1994* (London: Cape, 1995), pp.21-29 (p.24).

62 For a discussion of postmodernist criticism as self-validation, see Steven Connor, 'Postmodernism and the Academy', in *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp.[3]-20 (pp.6-7).

symptom of entrapment is only an illusion, and the listening reader simply needs the courage to remain as a listener:

> Listening is, of course, shaped by a labyrinth, the labyrinth of the ear itself. Modernist demystification – the tendency to disillusion or 'disenchantment', an attempt to escape magic which characterises the modernist project – produced one dominant understanding of flight: as exile. But exile itself implies a stable territorialised home. Postmodernism is able to sustain the possibility of enchantment – known conventionally as the 'postmodern sublime' – and will take the risk of enchantment in listening, the risk of self-amazement; as a result, the flights which it has privileged are those which have no root and no landing: a state of exile without territory.[63]

His listeners/readers are given the freedom to 'risk [...] self-amazement' and experiment with identity and response but can do so, without obstructing their intellectual value, by remaining silent. (Elusiveness in many of the poems I will discuss is equally a sign of remaining unpredictable and creative as a writer.) The postmodernist reader, as Docherty describes him or her, might be a genuinely silent complement to a text, in comparison with the reader described by David Trotter as essentially still a Modernist construction. Trotter's reader becomes involved in the exchange system of paying critical compliments in the form of responses to the text (characterised by Trotter as marginal notes). Docherty's reader, in contrast, is able to prolong paying his or her critical debt to the text indefinitely, while they 'sustain the possibility' of the state of reading; his description of a 'state of exile' means having no recourse to a recognised critical currency. As much as Docherty argues for a process of reading as exploration, it is therefore hard to see how

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63 Thomas Docherty, *After Theory* (Edinburgh: EUP, 1996), p.176.

this might be translated into the terms of valuation of an academic system, which no more comprehensively accepts postmodernist self-validation than it comprehensively supports Practical Criticism.

A third solution is to renew the way of training the reading function so that writer and reader are equal functions within the educational system: such a solution could mean not having to choose between validation and creativity. Rob Pope describes this as '*critical-creative* in that it combines – and often fuses – critical analysis with forms of creative writing and, more especially, creative *re*writing'. In tune with Docherty, he describes how the 'radically "postmodern" – and at the same time thoroughly "ancient" – textual practices' of 'imitation, parody, pastiche and adaptation' could be adapted in training student readers, so that the writing produced is then compared with the text which prompted it. As he points out, this is not a new idea to the primary or secondary school teacher, but the problem is to convince higher education of its validity. It does depend on an analysis of difference – the assumption of a rhetorical model of criticism that there will be something to analyse: but the rhetorical analysis of the teaching element is reduced to dependence on whatever direction the creative reader decides to pursue. One of Pope's principles, at the top of a list of ten, is that '1. In reading texts we re-write them', as opposed to the acknowledgement much further down the list:

> 9. All *communication* involves *exchange* and *change*: textual ex/changes cannot be divorced from social ex/changes. The understanding of text intertextually is therefore continuous with the understanding of people interpersonally.[64]

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64 Rob Pope, 'Critical-Creative Re-Writing: A Briefing', *The European English Messenger*, 8 (Autumn 1999), pp.41-44 (p.43).

The blur between training someone in the act of reading texts and the act of reading or psychoanalysing other people is the recurrent pitfall of assuming that the function of 'reader' will behave as a person would. But what Pope provides is a suggestion for how criticism can remain practically applied, but not constrain the person who reads within the reading function. Practically, it allows a closer response to, perhaps an affinity with, writers who have presented revisioning of themselves or of their contexts or their countries, an adequate response to the practice that Blanchot describes of writers reading and writing their own work.

Most of all, if these revisionings are presented as experimental, fluid, subject to change depending on the circumstance of the writer's rereading, then perceiving the act of reading as a creative rewriting would allow a responsive reading more suited to the flexibility of the writer's voice: the ultimate definition of the reader's function, discarding the problems of statistical or theoretical approaches to defining the reader, could be simply as a listener. In this chapter, I have referred to the frequent metaphors of either reader or writer ensconced in a private, solitary or silent space, and to the idea that listening to a text can reveal subtleties of regional or professional accent; that metaphor is heightened for the reader and writer of poetry who, in Don Paterson's description of translation, share a particular reverence for acoustic qualities in his metaphor of a poem as a sacred formal structure like a church. Even Barthes's understanding of himself as a reader in terms of listening to his musicality contributes to my proposition that the function of the reader could simply be that of the listener. The word 'reader' is often used to describe the function of the critic, and it is therefore easy to assume that the reader will automatically also be a critic. Of course it is likely that many of the people

who read a poem will eventually make some sort of critical judgement about what they have read, but this does not mean that the function of reading should therefore be described as also being the function of a critic.

The reader as listener becomes more alert to nuances of textual convention, which has specific relevance for the work of contemporary Scottish writers, as I will discuss in the next chapter with reference to Helen Bryant Voigt's important comparisons of listening to, and looking at, prose and poetry; in Chapter 5 I will return to the particular connection of listening and relationships in a discussion of attitudes towards literary inheritance in the poems of Kathleen Jamie and W. N. Herbert. These relationships are not examined in poems in order to rarify the issues at stake until they are neutralised out of all existence. Choosing to discuss these issues in poems opens a whole box of difficulties, although it often seems as if these difficulties are relished by the poets whose work I will discuss; they seem to relish difficulty exactly because it spurs them on to greater originality, a closer definition of their own voices, and a more exacting awareness of their relationship with the media in which they work. Problems of human and literary relationships and of aural qualities of language are given a different lease of life in the gritty problems created by expressing them in poems; and since the problems are set out on the tangible medium of the printed page, they are also inevitably augmented by the challenges of capturing aurality, and orality, in print. These challenges help to raise the question of how to render language in print, particularly when the poets want to express something about the patterns or pronunciation of the language they work in which cannot be fully expressed in what is accepted as standard English. As poets listen to what makes their work distinctive in the ear and on the page, their poems will

demonstrate decisions about how much poets can use aurality to define the accents that give them context – whether those accents are the kind that identify where people live and how they speak, or the accents of form which characterise the poets' literary inheritance and influences.

Discussing the connection between Scottish orality and print in the example of the modern Scottish novel, Cairns Craig argues that when the printed page is used to emphasise 'the interaction of standard written forms of language with the representation of the oral', then it becomes impossible to ignore 'the texture of the page'; the physical circumstance of a text, its typography, 'ceases to be the neutral medium through which meaning is conveyed and becomes itself one of the key components of meaning'.[65] His comments are specifically on the spaces (typographic and otherwise) of the Scottish novel, but on the way that these spaces turn on formal potential; listening in conclusion to a passage from Iain Banks's *The Crow Road*, Craig comments that the modern Scottish novel 'has not been within the narrative of history, but between history and other, between the mapmaker's map and an 'otherworld' where space has different dimensions'.[66] It is just this sort of creative, comparative hinterland which only opens up if the reader (and the function of the reader) is allowed to make a new survey of the received conventions of reading, willing to reclassify features of formal terrain according to the evidence of their ears as they report speech, their own included. In this reclassification, narrative and novelistic techniques are not divorced from lyric and poetic technique for the reader, any more than for the Scottish writers who experiment with

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65 Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination* (Edinburgh: EUP, 1999), p.169.

66 Craig, p.241.

both forms. The passage which Craig cites from *The Crow Road* describes how in listening to the narrative, as the character describes listening to his father's story-telling, the novel reader can discover that 'Scotland is a space of "turning things round"'; only by listening to the narratives and narrative texture of the space before them, whether that space is the physical space of the page or the space of the landscape, is the poetry reader able to recognise the distinctive turns between lyric and narrative in contemporary Scottish writing.[67]

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67 Craig, p.241.

Chapter 4

Some Longer Scottish Poems: Form and Purpose in Longer Poems by Tracey Herd, Robin Robertson, Don Paterson and Robert Crawford

> *Listening is, of course, shaped by a labyrinth, the labyrinth of the ear itself [...] Postmodernism is able to sustain the possibility of enchantment known conventionally as the 'postmodern sublime' – and will take the risk of enchantment in listening, the risk of self-amazement; as a result, the flights which it has privileged are those which have no root and no landing: a state of exile without territory.*
>
> *Thomas Docherty*[1]

> *I find myself therefore in an ambiguous position both with regard to language and with regard to the preconceptions of what I do in art, and I must say that it has at times been a nightmarish labyrinth. It has resulted in desperate manoeuvre in order to be true to myself.*
>
> *Iain Crichton Smith*[2]

John Burnside, Robert Crawford, W. N. Herbert, Tracey Herd, Kathleen Jamie, Don Paterson and Robin Robertson are not a group or a school of poets in the sense that a group might have a shared manifesto, or make a conscious decision to collaborate on work, or seek to be understood as a group. The closest they have come so far to drawing connections in interviews or articles is to note occasional similarities in their poetry, putting it down to coincidence rather than plan; as I will discuss in the concluding chapter, there has been an attempt to describe this generation of Scottish poets as 'Informationists', but the term itself partly depends on a healthy scepticism about herding poets into literary criticism's groupings. Yet there are connections between these poets, and the most important of these is that out of their generation of Scottish poets they have

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1 Thomas Docherty, *After Theory* (Edinburgh: EUP, 1996), p.176.

2 Iain Crichton Smith, 'Structure in My Poetry', in *The Poet's Voice and Craft*, ed. by C.B.McCully (Manchester: Carcanet, 1994), pp.104-122 (p.104).

all made their living through poetry and through work connected to their poetry or to the poetry business. John Burnside and Kathleen Jamie teach creative writing at the University of St Andrews; John Burnside was writer in residence at the University of Dundee, where Don Paterson and Tracey Herd have also taught creative writing; W. N. Herbert has been a writer in residence in several Scottish posts, and in the later 1990s taught creative writing at Lancaster University; he now teaches at the University of Newcastle. W. N. Herbert and Robert Crawford have both written published doctoral theses on twentieth-century poetry, Herbert on MacDiarmid and Crawford on Eliot. Burnside, Herbert and Crawford have all been or still are editors of small poetry magazines based in Scotland. Don Paterson and Robin Robertson are poetry editors for two of the six or seven major UK imprints to publish poetry. Paterson edits the Picador poetry list, and Kathleen Jamie's last collection, *Jizzen*, was published by Picador under his editorship, rather than by Bloodaxe which published her previous two collections. Robertson runs the Jonathan Cape poetry list, though his duties also include reviving Cape's contemporary fiction, and is Robert Crawford's and John Burnside's editor. All are familiar names on the short-lists of literary prizes, and all contribute to literary journals or to newspapers, whether with prose commentary, book reviews or new poems.

In addition, Kathleen Jamie, Don Paterson, John Burnside, Robert Crawford and Tracey Herd all live within a 20-mile radius of Dundee, Robin Robertson is a Scot who lives in London, W. N. Herbert was born and brought up in Dundee and now lives in North Tyneside. All were born in the later 1950s and 1960s. Although their poetry is not routinely written in Scots, it is alert to the possibilities of speech in which place is recognised; some have described the process of developing their poetic register by

returning to recollections of childhood speech which simultaneously act as strong evocations of place. They are not, then, a group or school in the sense that a single term could define their poetry, but I would argue that they are a group in that they are linked by professional connections, their age group, and by strong connections with the east coast of Scotland which are examined in their poems. This does not make them a group or school of poets in the sense that literary criticism would allow; but they are likely to be perceived as being connected in these other ways by readers, publishers and reviewers. They are all aware of some of the expectations of the contemporary poet, whether those are the expectations held by reviewers, editors, school pupils, teachers, creative writing students, festival organisers, book buyers, publicists or the shadowy presence of the general reader; to an extent, these expectations certainly affect their working lives, and may inspire or hinder their work. Yet if they are aware of the business of poetry, the world populated by what I. A. Richards called 'literary people, men of letters', they are also aware of the world which Richards could more confidently claim was free of monetary bargaining; the training of poetry readers which, as pupils in the Scottish secondary education system, they have experienced for themselves.[3]

This kind of training seems to have been experienced by some of the poets I will discuss as a kind of bargaining, or playing along with an educational system; the training afforded by the educational system seems to have been an unavoidable obstacle to their writing, just as they may still experience grants, prizes, teaching, reviewing or book royalties as another kind of bargain which means they can afford to spend more of their

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3 I.A. Richards to D.E. Pilley, November 1923, in Box 1, I. A. Richards Collection. Published in John Constable, ed., *Selected Letters of I. A. Richards, CH* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990) pp.26-28 (p.28).

time writing. "It was entirely exam-driven at school, rather than about developing a life-long love of poetry", Kathleen Jamie says of her own experiences of Practical Criticism and of being taught poetry at school.[4] Tracey Herd remembers Practical Criticism being taught as preparation for the Higher English exam, and describes the teaching of poetry at school as "infrequent" and "intimidating"; she felt that the techniques of Practical Criticism were mainly explained to the pupils as applying the same set of procedures to each poem, and that preparation for the paper was a matter of learning a set of "standard responses".[5]

Yet although reactions to Practical Criticism necessarily mention its exam-related values, that does not mean that its only effect on all these poets was as a repressive element of the literature syllabus in Scottish secondary education. John Burnside found studying poetry at secondary school "a horrible chore", where "you read the poetry and then if you didn't understand it you were wrong – that's *wrong* as in *the wrong answer* in mathematics"; however, when he encountered Practical Criticism formally for the first time, in a seminar group at technical college which was taught by a practising poet, he found instead that "it was a kind of revelation that you could discuss poetry as a live thing". He feels now that Practical Criticism is essential for students of English, but particularly important for creative writing students, like those he teaches, because it enables students and teacher to recognise, and to have the vocabulary to discuss, how a poem works.[6] Robert Crawford was also "fed Practical Criticism through studying

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4 Kathleen Jamie, telephone interview, 6 June 2002.

5 Interview with Tracey Herd, Dundee, 19 June 2002.

6 Interview with John Burnside, Cellardyke, 4 July 2002.

poetry at school", in preparation for Higher English, but read I. A. Richards's *Practical Criticism* as an undergraduate. Rather than feeling that the book itself was as off-putting as the school version of Richards's practice, he found, as several of these poets did, that the challenges it set him as a reader and as a young writer were intriguing. "I was intrigued by his idea of ambiguity as value, and by the way that the book was set out like a science text – it seemed at once alluring and rebarbative".[7] It is also the case that these poets' own readership may have been taught in their turn to read poetry with an awareness of Practical Criticism's techniques; whether or not the poets may feel that Practical Criticism influenced their own development, it may influence the expectations of their readers. Don Paterson perhaps sees one of the main legacies of Practical Criticism, the study of ambiguity, as helpful, when he describes reactions to one of his poems: "there's another poem in [*God's Gift to Women*] that I really like too because it's capable of good misreadings. I think people do read into it what they want to read into it and I like that idea, it's a benchmark of the variety of readings". But when asked if he remembers at any point in his formal education being taught how to read a poem, his response suggests that the influence of this formal training prompted him to react against that kind of ambiguity at first as if it were only an unsatisfactory ambivalence:

> Absolutely. The definitive explanation of what was meant: 'When the poet says —, what he really means is —', and you'd think, well why the fuck didn't he just say what he meant?[8]

It could be this impatience with not saying what you mean as a poet which encouraged

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7 Interview with Robert Crawford, St Andrews, 31 May 2002.

8 Interview with Don Paterson, Edinburgh, 12 March 2000.

Paterson, as I will discuss, to make explicit the ambiguities and sense of formal potential in his own poems.

W. N. Herbert seems to have had the best, or perhaps the most interestingly ambivalent, experience of the Scottish schools' system of poetry teaching. Like Robert Crawford, he enjoyed the challenges of a Practical Criticism training which was 'always with an emphasis on how the forms of poetry contained and conveyed meaning'. He recalls being taught Practical Criticism at the Grove Academy in Dundee, which was certainly of help in passing school exams and in gaining his Oxford entrance, but which also 'did have an influence on my writing – mostly a positive one in that I felt that poems could be approached and their mysteries unscrambled to some extent' and 'set me off on that apprenticeship without end: the attempt to master all the forms you're given and can invent'. Most interestingly, his recollections suggest it was that Practical Criticism of his Dundee schooling which actually supported him in his study of contemporary Scottish poetry, both at school, when he studied Norman MacCaig ('the fact that a contemporary (still alive) Scottish poet was taught was very important to me'), and later in his D.Phil. research on MacDiarmid. His comments also encapsulate the way in which Richards's practice was incorporated in degree-level English studies as the antithesis of a theoretical approach, when he describes how a training in Practical Criticism can be in equal parts a preparation for a calculated approach to the degree system, and a revelatory technique in literary criticism:

> These tutors [at Oxford] were, to the extent they were aware of it, anti-theory, so our essays tended to oscillate between rebellion and close analysis of texts. This had the distinct advantage to the undergraduate mind of minimising secondary reading. It

> certainly had a bearing on my later reading of MacDiarmid for my thesis, where I opted for close textual scrutiny in order to uncover the literary and non-literary sources he deployed.[9]

The influences of Practical Criticism certainly seem strong in these poets' recollections, even if they feel it was a mixed blessing, or something that they definitely wanted to react against as young writers. It is in one way a useful introduction to formal challenges, a sense of difficulty and complexity which some of these poets actively enjoy introducing in their own work. It is also an introduction to a way of reading poetry which they later realise may be shared by many of their own readers, an exasperating or even intimidating expectation of uncovering oblique meanings and ambiguities.

This chapter, and the one following, are therefore broadly discussing poems which explicitly and implicitly embody the problems of making a poem. These poets are aware that poetry can be feared as a school exercise, but also aware of the fact that it is exactly this school exercise which helps to provide them with an audience of informed readers, or listeners, who will be able to recognise and appreciate their sophisticated handling of these problems. I will also discuss the ways in which artifice and a sense of the unnatural are involved and even exploited in making these poems; the poems in this chapter are continually torn between anticipating and acknowledging the expectations of readers, and expressing a guilt at this recognition of an audience, a recognition which is foregrounded by the involvement of all these poets in the poetry business. Lastly, in this chapter I shall show how these issues are combined in recent adaptations of the form and purpose of the long poem in modern Scottish literature.

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9 W. N. Herbert, e-mail correspondence, 21 June 2002.

The reading and marketing, as well as the writing, of poetry highlight two issues to do with the categorising of work. The first is that the characterisation of poets' work, through book-covers, reviewing, critical discussion, media, and even too heavy a reliance on the poets' own description of what they write, may over-emphasise one area of interest or tone of voice in their poetry. In cases like those of Robert Crawford's poetry (identified with a zeal for Scotland and technology), John Burnside's (contemplative spirituality) or Kathleen Jamie's (women's writing), this insistence on a particular element tends to skew the perception of other subtle but vital explorations within their work. In particular, these chapters will emphasise that Robert Crawford's poems also employ a discussion of privacy, John Burnside's an interest in guilt, suspense and the *polis*, and Kathleen Jamie's an early love-hate relationship with the exploration of form and metre. These interests are reflected in their comments in interviews and prose writing, but in some cases are drowned out by the noise being made about a more noticeable feature of their writing – and sometimes the comments of the writers, intentionally or not, add to that noise. However, a second problem involved in the category of poetry itself is that it becomes all too easy to ignore how the boundaries between prose and poetry are sometimes deliberately blurred, and also to ignore a more subtle distinction between those elements of a poem which are to do with lyric form and those elements which are to do with narrative. As Ellen Bryant Voigt argues in the article I will discuss, it is not necessarily the line-endings nor the regularity of metre which most satisfyingly distinguish a poem from a piece of prose; the distinction can be made by considering the audibly different approaches to narrative.

I suggested in the Introduction that creativity in poetry tends to be seen as the

point of origin of a process which continues through publication and ends in readership and criticism. In this chapter and the next, I want to describe how some poems can instead be read as the culmination of this process, and how they will therefore show explicit and implicit responses to the expectation of what a contemporary Scottish poem is going to be. In this chapter, I look at poems which deal with the intimacy of relationships or the intimate tone of love poetry, but which combine that intimacy with a sense of surprise, of being un-natural. How to incorporate formal challenges in a poem, and how to remake those formal problems so that they seem in some sense to be easily, naturally controlled by the writer, is hardly a problem exclusive to the contemporary Scottish poets of the *Dream State* anthology and their subsequent careers. However, their real difficulty has been how to reinvent what seems artificial so that the artificial and the engineered elements of a poem can be associated with originality, a new-found energy, and still seem refreshingly connected to an existence outside poetry circles.

Robert Crawford's aim for his poems, he wrote in *Dream State* in 1994, was to construct something robust enough to reach out to a large readership, and he used a deliberately inorganic metaphor; 'a four-wheel drive poetry [...] that could go into all sorts of territories, and go there with a big audience'.[10] Don Paterson's statement in *Dream State* seems like the antithesis to Robert Crawford's relish for engineering, when he wrote in his turn that 'too many poems these days anticipate the arguments they raise in the course of telling themselves'.[11] However, it is just this awareness that a poem can betray that it is knowingly, consciously constructed which is at the heart of many of his

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10 Robert Crawford's statement in *Dream State*, ed. by Daniel O'Rourke (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1994), p.61.

11 Don Paterson's statement in *Dream State*, p.168.

own poems; and a poem that displays self-awareness, or self-consciousness, in any hints, clues and downright statements of intent it makes to the reader is only making a response to these ways in which poems are likely to be approached. This does help to emphasise the awkward distinction made between being wary of writing a poem which seems too artificially conscious of its own form and likely interpretation, and of a deliberate enjoyment of the constructed or the inorganic in many of these poems. Contemporary Scottish poets' recent experiments with a longer form of poem, a hybrid between a short lyric and a full-scale epic, reflect an interest in anticipating the response to a poem, and may also reflect a desire, or a pressure, to respond to the Scottish political situation through poetry. It may be helpful to examine three pieces of criticism which are relevant to this chapter's discussion of the influences on the modern longer Scottish poem. The first is an essay by Christopher Ricks on how the reflexive figure in poetry reinforces an impression that the poem's structure as well as subject is organic or natural. The second is a special issue of *Chapman* which assessed the state of the Scottish long poem in 1981, before these poets became established. The third is Ellen Bryant Voigt's more recent discussion of the distinction between prose and poetry, 'The Flexible Lyric'.

In an essay first published in 1978, Christopher Ricks identified the reflexive figure as the device 'at the heart' of both Marvell's poetry and the work of a group of contemporary Irish poets.[12] The essay emphasises firstly the intensity with which these poems regarded organic metaphors as a sign of creative authenticity, and secondly the intensity with which the organic metaphor was coupled with the idea of an independent political nation. In the case of both the poem and the nation, origin was not a question

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12 Christopher Ricks, 'Andrew Marvell: "Its own resemblance"', in *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), pp.34-59 (p.44).

of making or crafting, but of spontaneous growth from a single source. Ricks described this particular use of the reflexive as signalled by the word 'own'; it is 'that which goes beyond saying of something that it *finds* its own resemblance, and says instead, more wittily and more mysteriously, that something *is* its own resemblance'.[13] The reflexive is for Ricks principally a sign in the Irish poets' work of something organic, or naturally evolved; each of his examples, both from Marvell and from Heaney, Longley, Mahon and Muldoon, concerns natural bodies, organisms, landscapes, moles, snails, or Heaney's Grauballe man whose body has, so significantly, become part of the land as it 'lies / on a pillow of turf / and seems to weep // the black river of himself'.[14] He pointed briefly in examples from Marvell and his peers towards the potential the reflexive displays for discussions of narcissism, and the chastening of the reader; Ricks identifies the reflexive as displaying a 'paradisal' and, given his example of Marvell's serpent cradling Eden in its folds, paradoxical innocence. By referring to instances in the poems in which the reflexive draws attention to human vanities and failings, Ricks implies that the reflexive therefore potentially supports a moralist reading of a poem, but that equally important is the reflexive's implication for a kind of moral aspect to the consideration of a poem's formal whole. Enforcing the tradition of the Practical Criticism reading, the reflexive encourages the reader to turn back into the structural body of the poem, foregrounding the central problem of how form cradles argument; in drawing attention to a poem's subject by using what can be such a noticeable, even mannered, figure which describes its subjects purely in their own terms, the reader is forced to pay attention to technique as much as, and possibly more than, subject.

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13 Ricks, p.34.

14 Seamus Heaney, 'The Grauballe Man', *North* (London: Faber, 1975), pp.28-29 (p.28).

For Ricks, reading so much importance into a syntactical figure is finally justified because the poems' formal conceits are rooted firmly in a search for a buried authenticity, like the convoluting lines engraved throughout *North* which eventually lead the collection back to points of origin. It is not only natural but, in the strictest sense of elegantly resolved technicalities, *easy*. Yet as Ricks also pointed out, if the reflexive highlights an organic collusion, it also lends itself to analogies of internal division, in the 'civil war of language and the imaginable'.[15] Identifying 'own' as something which repeats itself in unchanging natural cycles seems to go hand in hand with reflecting a mood of perpetual division. The essay is an example of the critical interest in identifying in Irish contemporary poets' work the organic combination of form and argument in often pastoral subjects. The Scottish writers to be examined here are working with knowledge, and varying degrees of appreciation, of Seamus Heaney and other contemporary Irish poets, like Eavan Boland, at their backs; Heaney is a particularly influential author for these poets, while Boland, whose work began to be published some time after Heaney's, is also an influential figure in that she consistently questions the role of a female writer in a male tradition of politicised poetry in English. Yet contemporary Scottish poets have not been writing to the model of Irish poems on landscape, domesticity and their uneasily close relations with political territory. The younger Scottish poets experiment with form so that they can identify what they can call 'own'; but they recognise that although they might describe their 'own' as some kind of unquestionably authentic voice from within themselves, it has to be brought into being in poems through a conscious harnessing of different, sometimes apparently

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15 Ricks, p.55.

incompatible, resources of form, subject and language.

This puts particularly the longer Scottish poem in a curious position. For example, Robin Robertson's 'Camera Obscura' or Tracey Herd's 'No Hiding Place', as I will discuss, might seem to be a spontaneous and organic exploration of a single source of material (Robertson's researches into early photography, or Herd's semi-autobiographical account of childhood nightmares). The poems may seem unplanned, growing effortlessly into extended collages of different speaking voices, varieties of verse forms, prose poems, found poems, or evocations of other genres. They rarely display obvious unity of form, or constantly moving narrative. The poems often give an impression of feeling their way towards an authenticity of expression, and so seem to have just grown into the forms they have achieved. But on closer examination they are trenchantly about what is not, in several senses, organic form. Instead, they document discovery and the place of scientific observation, on both the emotions of the figures in the poems, and on the form of their poems. In his essay, Ricks identified how form reflected a search for a true point of origin and a natural authenticity for poems which were written in English but were not English poems; he related that search for a personal origin (where do I come from? how do I really speak?) to a more wide-ranging metaphor for a political situation which is both divided and tied together by civil war. For the Scottish poets, the techniques and situation are subtly and significantly different, and relying on the idea of the natural and the organic is not seen as a satisfactory basis from which to develop form.

That form should be treated as a particularly *natural* reflection of a nation was refuted in a special issue of *Chapman* on the Scottish long poem. In the main work on

the subject of extended poetic form, M. L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall's *The Modern Poetic Sequence* (1983), the contemporary poetic sequence is described as having 'evolved [...] so naturally, so without fanfare, as hardly to have been noticed'.[16] On the contrary, the *Chapman* view of the extended poem in the later twentieth century was mainly that length was a triumphant cohesion of political and social reality; form had to be consciously taken apart and re-engineered because lyric was too small, and sometimes too self-consciously the domain of a particular kind of artistic outlook, to explain a whole nation. Perhaps, after the failed 1979 referendum on Scottish devolution, the *Chapman* writers felt a desire in 1981 to find a cohesive structure which would provide a metaphor of a possible Scottish state to come, and this cohesive structure was all about providing a far-reaching sense of support and confidence. As John Smith was commenting in another Scottish journal in 1981, 'I believe that to bring about serious constitutional change one needs to be on a rising current: one needs to be buoyed up, and to be capable of some self-confidence', and he blamed 'the Scottish professional middle-class' for being afraid of the risk and effort they feared might be involved in devolution.[17] This mood is recaptured in Kathleen Jamie's recollection, after the 1997 referendum on devolution, of the 1980s as a heightening of relations between poetry and politics in Scotland:

> The Scotland I was born into still believed its stock in trade was failure, disunity, and disappointment, stirred up with an angry pride. Now we can see these events [1979

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16 M. L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall. *The Modern Poetic Sequence: The Genius of Modern Poetry* (New York: OUP, 1983), p.3.

17 John Smith interviewed by Neal Ascherson and Tom Nairn in the *Bulletin of Scottish Politics*, Spring 1981. Reprinted in Lindsay Paterson, ed., *A Diverse Assembly: The Debate on a Scottish Parliament* (Edinburgh: EUP. 1998), 135-140 (p.139).

> referendum, SNP and Labour divisions, Margaret Thatcher's period of office and Poll Tax] not as failures at all, but increments – steps in our slow building up of energy, and confidence. It is in the creation of confidence and energy where I would cite, with a certain pride, my generation of poets.[18]

This is certainly a description of a gradual change, but these hard-won 'steps in our slow building up of energy' are not symptomatic of a situation which evolves effortlessly. If, as the *Chapman* writers felt, there must be investigation of poetic forms which could encourage at least a literary optimism and risk, it would necessarily involve going against the supposedly natural state in poetry and national self-perception. The current version of the long Scottish poem is not based on, as Rosenthal and Gall described, a process of 'evolving [...] naturally', but in many respects on active attempts to go against the natural grain.

Yet to attribute the experiment of the longer Scottish poem solely to the needs of national self-perception seems to me rather unsatisfactorily to co-opt both imagination and form in poetry into singing in unison. The political mood may, as Kathleen Jamie describes, influence the poetic mood. The resulting poetic mood in turn may contribute to a gathering sense of national worth and confidence in literary and political achievement. But to claim that the longer Scottish poems of the later 1980s and 1990s are a metaphor for national cohesion, as *Chapman* claimed of long poems before 1981, would be to force a sense of cohesion where none really exists. These longer poems are about the trying on of new forms, and about the impossible extensions of short fragments and lyric forms into a longer piece against the natural inclinations of the form – for

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[18] Kathleen Jamie, 'Dream State', *Poetry Review*, Winter 1997-98, 87(4), 35-37 (35).

example, Robin Robertson's use of fragments like diary entries, of short sections of verse, and of his extenuation of song lyrics throughout the poem 'Camera Obscura'. In some cases the subjects of these poems are the trying on of different human bodies, like Robert Crawford's cross-gender writing of Margaret Oliphant. In a more darkly physical manifestation of the longer poem, Tracey Herd's 'No Hiding Place' examines with merciless details the strangeness of our relationship with the body and yearns for the freedom of choosing a different body to inhabit as a change of identity, or simply choosing another body to look after, as a lover, jailer or bodyguard. This extension of the human and the poetic form is not natural, at least not if 'natural' means a form that can be achieved without conscious human effort.

Yet in order to connect these experiments, there has to be some kind of backbone which articulates the separate parts: in these poems, narrative is that backbone. An essay by Ellen Bryant Voigt discusses both the role of narrative in poetry, and how it illuminates the distinction between form and structure regardless of a poem's length. Of equal interest is her argument that the contemporary blurring of boundaries between prose and poetry is most noticeable aurally, when work is read aloud rather than seen on the page; in American writing, at least, she argues, the increasing similarity between prose and poetry is particularly relevant to the longer, often free form of extended poems and the connective patterns of lyric sequence. Whatever the length of the work, she points out that it is initially difficult to tell simply by listening what is prose and what poetry, unless the listener is alert to the role of narrative in poetic form. She uses as example a public reading where a writer had read aloud a new piece, which was a story, and afterwards was complimented by someone in the audience on the new poem. The

writer was taken aback that the narrative nature of what she had read was not obvious to her listener, since:

> in her piece each action in sequence closed out the possibilities for succeeding action, and each descriptive detail narrowed the narrative circumstance: a story.[19]

In contrast, a poem which had then been read aloud played with the idea of telling a story but, as Voigt says, 'held time in abeyance':

> Although there were many characterizing 'actions' planted shrewdly throughout, there was only a single consequential one, with the barest of circumstantial motivation, placed close to the end with the same deft efficiency as the couplet in a sonnet.[20]

Whilst 'form' and 'structure' are often used as interchangeable terms, Voigt lays out a working definition where structure is the gradual exposition of narrative actions; form is the often aurally-dependent, but sometimes arbitrary or classificatory, patterning which gives an outer shape to the developing structural argument like rhyme-schemes, lists, stanzaic shape, alphabetical ordering. The longer poems I will discuss rely on narratives, on biographies and autobiographies. These narratives fall into Voigt's category of 'characterizing "actions"'; the narratives in the poems are contained within a structure which answers Voigt's definition of a poem. Yet the extent to which these longer poems foreground a sometimes dizzying selection of formal features suggests that their real narrative is the development of their own form. Where the climax of narratives within the poem is placed near the end, as she suggests is appropriate to a poem, the climax of the

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19 Ellen Bryant Voigt, 'The Flexible Lyric'. *The Kenyon Review*, 21(3-4), Summer-Fall 1999, 181-226 (p.182).

20 Voigt, p.182.

narratives usually coincides with a similar climax in the formal elements of the poem. An example would be, as I discuss further in this chapter, is the penultimate section of Robertson's 'Camera Obscura' in which the climax of his subject's biography is vying for attention with the prose poem in which it is written, in which every feature of the poem's form is recapitulated.

Voigt in fact goes on to discuss the turn or *volta* as not just a rhyming couplet but as existing in complicated relationship with guilt. Unlike the completing turn of a sonnet which Christopher Ricks had identified in his discussion of the reflexive, Voigt shows the turn of the poem as a guilty examination of the self which prolongs rather than curtails poems. Her connection of guilt, often an obsessive underpinning of poems about love, with the contemporary and, as she describes it, 'flexible' lyric's understated evocation of form provides a way of discussing aurality and form in these longer poems. Guilt in these poems, and collections, is connected with various relationships, often ones that should be loving and are not, or should in some way be different from what they are; predominant is a subversive sense of guilt about attention to form, when somehow the process of making the poem proves a guilty distraction in itself. But guilt is also connected with a possessiveness and secrecy about form. Sometimes if the poems seem to disclose narrative secrets, the form is quickly blocking off the routes to a simple interpretation of that secret; if they disclose a simplicity of formal pattern, the narrative may refuse to share any such innocent aim. Half a secret might be acknowledged, giving the illusion of illumination, but the other half becomes more deeply buried in desperately oblique manoeuvre. The idea of the reflexive 'own' exists in these poems as a tenacity and persistence of emotions, but perhaps 'own' is also reflected in the sense of division.

Rather than a division which reflects a context of political division, which Ricks found in the work of contemporary Irish poets, these poems seem more directly to reflect the guilty relationship between the emotionally-charged narratives and the lyric technique which helps to sustain and express those narratives. I have suggested that it may be possible to read these poems as being a response to the outside influences of national politics, or to the expectations of the poets held by readers and by the marketplace. In some of the poems these influences may be less or more obvious, but what I think is consistently present in these poems is a conscious concern with form and the desire to expand its boundaries. These concerns are certainly visible in longer poems by Tracey Herd and Robin Robertson.

Tracey Herd and Robin Robertson are the two poets in these chapters who were not included in the *Dream State* anthology of 1994 because neither had published collections, but both have been included in later anthologies and are included in the second edition of *Dream State*. Robin Robertson's *A Painted Field* was published in 1997, and Tracey Herd's *No Hiding Place* in 1996. In both collections, there is a long poem made up of a combination of textures which exerts a dreamlike, suspended mood, not least because of the sometimes frantic twisting between different lyric textures and narratives. Both long poems look initially as if they will be happily resolved by their endings, although we discover by the ends of each that this isn't true. Both collections also have cover images which imply an untroubled landscape, but the poems themselves contradict the cover images.

Tracey Herd was born in East Kilbride, but has earned membership of the Dundee diaspora of Burnside, Crawford, Herbert, Jamie and Paterson by living in Fife, reading

English and American Studies at the University of Dundee until graduating in 1991, and working as the University's creative writer in residence. In 1997 *No Hiding Place* was shortlisted for the Forward Prize and she took part in the New Blood tour, the Bloodaxe version of the New Generation, with Eleanor Brown, Julia Copus, Jane Holland and Roddy Lumsden. Her response to the promotional side of the poetry business was equivocal, because she was aware that her poems might seem too dark for public readings; she described how her unease about the reception of her poems affected her writing, saying that "It took me a long time to get to the stage where I felt I could write about things that interested me, that they would be childish or dull ... the difficult thing in the New Blood tour [was that] everybody else to some degree was quite witty and then Tracey comes on and blackens the mood a few shades".[21] Many of her poems are investigations into withdrawn moods or nightmares, and the 'childish' reveals clues to the production of her poems; she comments that the child's view has a nightmarish clarity before children are "conditioned", that "fear's more honest with them – and more terrifying".[22] The clarity of lyric wittiness is almost always present in the poems but, as she comments, is often overshadowed by more pressing problems, the kind of potent fears that she attributes to childhood despite her fascination with the veneers of adult glamour and poise.

The cover of *No Hiding Place* does suggest an investigation of the pastoral, but its title suggests a gentleness which is illusory; although these poems may not seem to their writer to be suitable for public readings, they are nonetheless obsessive about how

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21 Interview with Tracey Herd, St Andrews, 5 February 1999.

22 Tracey Herd, 5 February 1999.

exteriors and public images can affect the person beneath. After even a cursory reading of her poems, it is easy to recognise the continuation of what first prompted her interest in writing poetry; she was not inspired by the teaching of poetry for English exams, and the Practical Criticism she found so restrictive, but by drama studies in which she discovered that she could experiment with "being different people".[23] In one sense, the poems are gentle; Tracey Herd's recurrent, and often most characteristically successful, poems are those with almost elegiac rhythms which examine disproportioned iconography, invoking models and film stars whose iconic public image traps their human bodies. But the poems are not content to remain either gentle or pastoral. They are drawn to the possibilities of changing and exchanging bodies: it is precisely the unreal and the artificially constructed element of these iconographic myths which are shown as fascinating rather than repulsive. The figures in the cover image of the collection are looking out over a perspective which is too great for them to cross, but it is the very impossibility of crossing a gulf in anything other than the imagination which seems to fascinate her. The cover is corroborated by the epigraph to the final poem in the book, the long 'No Hiding Place', from the closing paragraph of Raymond Chandler's *Farewell My Lovely*, also entwined around impossibly glamorous disguise:

> It was a cool day and very clear. You could see a long way – but not as far as Velma had gone.[24]

Only death stops the imagining – and, in the sorts of fictions that Herd writes and alludes to, characters' deaths actually initiate obsessive detecting and imagining.

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23 Tracey Herd, 19 June 2002.

24 'No Hiding Place', *No Hiding Place* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1996), p.51.

Although the poems challenge discovery and confrontation, they are equally about a hankering to elude detection. They argue that the glamour and fascination of a subject come about through prolonging an illusion that no onlooker can ever really uncover what lies beneath a public image. Talking about the 'fantastically dark glamour' of 1970s fashion photography, she admitted:

> I'm fascinated by how people's minds work, how they're never what they appear to be, how they always have a mask that they wear in public like [the fashion model] Gia; they might have an image, but there's a tragic life that people don't see. Everybody in a way has that, though not to that extent, obviously! Or maybe that's the way it *used* to be. People are obsessed with souls and private lives laid bare now. There doesn't seem to be much mystery any more.[25]

This is not the comment of a writer who would be happy if her poems immediately gave up all their secrets at a public reading, even if that situation makes her uncomfortable because she fears that the poems may not be entertaining as a result. In fact, fictions and masks do not undermine the poems by being inauthentic, or repressing the original that lies underneath; in these poems, fictionalisation offers a freedom which becomes obvious in contrast with some of the more earthbound and apparently confessional poems. Crime fiction, even more than her poems' other obsession with racehorses, seems to provide a means of escape. Although crime fiction might more usually suggest revelation, it is used here as escape from too close an examination, despite her obvious relish of the more forensic vision it affords. Crime fiction as a genre acts as a delaying, obscuring tactic in her work. The more nightmarish qualities are in themselves a form of escape, if not

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25 Tracey Herd, 5 February 1999.

escapism; following the trail of blood usually leads further into the fantasy of dream or film-set in these poems, rather than outwards to ideas of resolution or conclusive proof.

The collection repeatedly returns to a fantasy of changing forms, most often of being able to change or exchange your own body. In 'The Survivors', the external detachment of the speaking voice which 'came at night when the weepy mother / sat doll-like' can diminish the threat of the father who has 'killed the lights', so that he becomes 'thumb-sized'.[26] The poems handle the fear and inevitability of carnage, and carnality, in something approaching a wallow in the macabre ('*Sex is carnage*, he said / poised above her like a butcher's knife'); escaping from the situation therefore usually involves discarding fleshy reality.[27] Bodies are abandoned or minimised, requiring the colluding reader to wince away from the unappetising acres of real flesh and, with the body in 'Soap Queen', sympathetically 'shiver at the sudden inrush of air, / draw my bleeding knees up to my chin'.[28] Where a reflexive metaphor demonstrates a convolution of reality, drawing inwards towards the self as the only authentic point of comparison, the bodies in Herd's poems compare themselves with different bodies, looking outwards for ideas of what disguise to adopt. In 'The Bathing Girls', there is an emulation of an almost alien glamour and maturity, embodied by the magically different images which two girls are looking at in a copy of *Vogue*, one girl is the sophisticated best friend who is admired but untouchable. The poem ends:

I hugged my schoolbooks close

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26 *NHP*, p.9.

27 'Words of Love', *NHP*, p.17.

28 *NHP*, p.13.

not wanting to see how my friend's sweater

clung to her tiny breasts, but unable

to take my eyes from her slicked red mouth.

I wanted to lean forward and kiss her.

In those days, anything seemed possible.[29]

The relationship between the two girls is intriguing for the speaking voice and for the listener, but it is the possibility of what can be hidden underneath a 'slicked red mouth', with its flauntedly theatrical disguise, which is the main attraction (a reflection of aspiration which reappears in poems like 'The Understudy'). Most of the stresses fall away from 'I', 'my', 'her', leaning temptingly into 'those days' and 'possible', an upbeat anacrusis as an understated rhythmic pattern: the relationship that is important is the relative distance between the possibility of 'those days' and the possibility of whatever remains unspoken after the final line. Possibility is frantically pursued, but rarely realised by figures in Herd's poems; they are more likely to be trapped into repeating an action over and over again, like Marilyn Monroe made to 'do the same scene / fifty times'.[30] It seems often as if the only bodies in which Herd can find a perfect marriage of form and purpose are not human at all, but racehorses, built for nothing but speed and escaping the rest of the field.

Tracey Herd's long poem 'No Hiding Place' starts with pictures which, like Robin Robertson's *'tableaux vivants'* in 'Camera Obscura', illustrate how wide the gulf

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29 'The Bathing Girls', *NHP*, p.10.

30 'Marilyn Climbs Out of the Pool', *NHP*, p.33.

between visual perception and communication can be.[31] Both poems bear out Blanchot's argument that the nearest the writer can get to understanding and communicating with a subject is in a discussion of how the subject's image is constructed, which in these poems is through celluloid, photographic plates, or the pages of a magazine; Blanchot explains that this yearning to understand image is because, for the writer, 'the manner of seeing is a kind of touch, when seeing is *contact* at a distance'.[32] It is significant that Tracey Herd and Robin Robertson both choose to write about aspects of pursuing visual images in a way that reveals their subjects' unresolved pursuit of human relationships; it is also significant that they choose to do so in an extended and even unresolvable form which is repeatedly shown to be fascinated with different forms and, in Robertson's case, with pastiche. It is also, perhaps, an indication of how much they are aware that the image of a poetic form, like the image of a public personality, carries a fascination and an importance for the reader which seems to go beyond a question of dry technicalities. Rather than exposing to the audience how a preoccupation with the artificial construction of public image, in a human or a poetic form, must inevitably distance the audience from the writer, or the writer from the subject, these collections suggest that confessing the irreconcilability of form and authenticity make the poems more intimate and vivid in their discussion of the shortfalls in human relationships.

'No Hiding Place' is particularly about how artforms can prolong the time in which reader or writer is distanced from intimacy; even its opening lines situate us on

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31 Robin Robertson, 'Camera Obscura'. *A Painted Field* (London: Picador, 1997), pp.59-93 (p.71).

32 Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. and intro. by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982; first publ. Paris, 1955), p.32.

both the other side of a bathroom door 'and half a world away', listening to a woman scream at a mirror which 'dares to show the passage of time'.[33] It is also a sequence dominated by narrative, continually cut through with different sorts of formal and physical touch from the delicately imagined to the brutal; it is about making violent impressions but deliberately not being able to make contact. The sequence works on a logic in which all that the speaker and reader seem to have in common is passivity in the face of narrative: it does not tolerate any sense of form being used as control, but instead suffers from a narrative which is powerful precisely because it is fragmented. Turning to the last page of the title poem, as if it might stick to the rules of the crime fiction novel, does not provide any answers. It will only reveal that the constructed space contains a reader intent on sustaining her own autobiographical silence:

> If I force myself to read very slowly
> I can make it last for another lifetime
> and still be out of the water
> before it gets completely dark.[34]

Yet this possibly self-conscious intrusion on the other narratives in the poem is an invitation to look at the speaker's private life as a reader; it acts as an intimate recognition of what the poem considers to be real (an existence based on escape through reading), rather than a distracting reminder that the poem might be only a poor imitation of reality. The audience is invited to look at what it feels like to be the audience for a piece of writing, just as if they were the audience for a poetry reading; the poem is

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33 'No Hiding Place', *NHP*, pp.51-62 (p.53).

34 *NHP*, p.62.

acutely conscious of audience response, and rather than being inadequately entertaining, as Herd feared she might be during live readings, it repeatedly deals with the idea of the reading audience at the heart of its formal structure.

The first section of the poem imagines a 'once beautiful face' in a mirror. The mirror, soon destroyed, helps the once-beautiful woman to appropriate the speaker's current youth, 'floating / mine across the glass to take its place'.[35] The speaker is at once the rightful successor to the beautiful older face, but also subordinate: she is younger, but unable to control the use of her own image, and curiously detached from the reflection that objectifies her in her turn. Stepping into bath water, 'The steam slides upwards from each shin. / I am shedding you both like a skin'.[36] 'You both' is indicative of the sense that only half a secret is being told, that the poem is a long withholding of information. Perhaps it is the legs, or the body itself, which are being shed, so shedding the vulnerably cut and altered legs in 'Soap Queen'; or 'you both' could be by association the restrictive obligation of a human relationship, like the parents in 'Soap Queen'. 'You both' could even be the pairing of a body and a mental image of that body, equally cumbersome and linked by the twin sounds of 'shin/skin'; is it, more importantly, the clumsiness of a formal manacle or obligation that is being shed?

The agent of change in the poem is water, or more precisely a fluidity which uses water as shorthand. The second section develops weight and hindrance and even the water is motionless as, assailed by a consciousness of bodies, the speaker finds that her watery freedom has temporarily failed; 'the bodies will float gently over to me / [...] and

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35 *NHP*, p.53.

36 *NHP*, p.53.

I will bend down / and their faces will be familiar'.[37] It is a nightmare of guerilla warfare in which the rules will never be explained: 'I always knew that one day / they would come for me: / last night the phone jangled'.[38] Yet in the next section, a woman is captured by a newspaper photograph in the act of self-destruction and 'immolation' is explored, apparently regardless of consequence, with a curiosity for unknown vocabulary; the act is first defined as 'conflagration' but is expanded into the aural reflections of 'conflagrant and brazen', displaying the sort of fascination with possibility that is examined in 'Bathing Girls'.[39] With a very faint echo of Cleopatra's iconography, the woman is blazing with fictional confidence as 'She sat in the middle of the water'; 'her face was stretched taught', in a suggestion that she, too, is caught up in floating different masks.[40] The redness of blood also washes through the poem, finally diluting into 'candy pink wallpaper [...] running like tears' on the walls of a girl's bedroom which restricts its later occupants to the 'newspaper dolls' and 'fairy ring' of an arrested development.[41]

The only way for the figure in the poem to escape is therefore through reading fiction; and, conversely, this means of escape forces the reader of the poem into a self-conscious examination of reading. The reading girl within them 'is only two-dimensional', and the room has the incomplete walls of a film set, open to a manipulation of what home should be; this space is far from being a safe house, church or library for

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37 *NHP*, p.54.

38 *NHP*, p.54.

39 *NHP*, p.55.

40 *NHP*, p.55.

41 *NHP*, p.60.

the girl or those who read her. The fourth wall is supplied only by reference to the comfortably oppressive motto, '*be it ever so humble*'.[42] That 'there's no place like home' is left for the reader's complementary contribution; unfairly, we are turned into the source of an invasive gaze, colluding with the many intruding mothers in the poem. But even when the room is thrown open to inspection, what is visible is proved to be a fake, a construction for cameras. The real inhabitant is somewhere else. Italicised phrases begin to take on the tone of mimicking something that can't be defied face to face, and make the poem resort to an awareness of its material nature on the printed page. The italicised voice of '*be it ever so humble*' ends the section about the room and its reader, to be followed in quick succession by the unstoppable, unexorcisable voice of 'you'. 'You' are now addressed as 'Grandmother', who is insisting on a tea-party for the exhumed; the threat of perpetual fairytale is again partially spelled out in the opening 'Grandmother, your hands are ice', just waiting for the traditional completion, 'All the better for...'.[43] Like Kathleen Jamie's Gaelic poet in 'Meadowsweet', Herd's lupine matriarch can't be prevented from speaking by simply killing and burying ('She clears her throat of earth / and small stones') but there is no guarantee that the poems she speaks are a true reflection of reality or of herself.[44] But unlike Jamie's poems, the knowledge that the matriarch's speech will survive any attempt to forget it defeats rather than inspires the speaker, with a ringing judgement of '*No wonder you're queer, child*'.[45]

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42 *NHP*, p.60.

43 *NHP*, p.61.

44 *NHP*, p.61.

45 *NHP*, p.61.

The last two sections again recall the two-dimensional girl with her open book, trapped in her room, but now allowed a voice and an escape route. She is presumably planning how to break down her fictional film-set by reading about *Nancy Drew and the Clue in the Crumbling Wall*; a recurrent figure in Herd's new poems, Nancy Drew is used because, while she is another two-dimensional girl who remains unaware that her freedom is a fiction, she exerts a charm over her readership which makes them happily suspend disbelief. As Herd says of her fascination with the character, "[Nancy Drew] can go in any direction because she's never made decisions that can't be reversed, she's never actually moving forward ... she's not using up time in her life and she's not making decisions that will come back to haunt her – I like the idea of that, it's a fantasy really".[46] The fantasy of reading in this section also has the potential to float reader away from body ('the cold / starts to slide like water / over my ankles and my mother / shouts from the house'), but one which is touched by sunlight ('the sun has stained the pages yellow').[47] The fantasy of escape which is provided by reading is also threatening, and literally engulfing yet it is no more help in actually escaping to a distant safety; 'the sun is minute, / floating just out of my reach'.[48] The figure of the reader in the poem is permanently at risk in this sequence, but risk does not provoke predictable reactions. The sequence began with a male fiction, licensed to investigate and probe a female figure in the way that Marlowe looks after Velma; but although in his own fictive account looking after Velma means protecting her, in the context of the poem his words are oddly content and absorbed in looking, aspirationally, after her departing figure. The sequence

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46 Tracey Herd, 5 February 1999.

47 *NHP*, p.62.

48 *NHP*, p.62.

ends with a female reader reading a girls' fantasy story; but the difference between this female and her previous incarnations is that the fantasy, flimsy as it is, is one in which she is creatively if not emotionally at peace, and desperately trying to remain. 'If I force myself to read very slowly / *I can make it last* for another lifetime' [my italics]: the power of knowing how to make something has not been demonstrated by an image of heredity, but in the prolonging and expanding of the obscurity of an interior world. The sequence seems to be propelled by guilt, a guilt about reading and about revealing that this is the most important element of the poem, but it does not seem to want or need an escape from that guilt.

Guilt doesn't go away in Herd's poem, where reading is revealed as an end, or prolonging an end, in itself. We are shown, or catch glimpses of, how some of the poem's characters expect particular behaviour from others, and we may experience as readers some hope that there will be solutions provided at the end of the poem to their mysteries. Yet all these kinds of expectation seem to be met in the poem by a guilty refusal to behave in a particular way, or to resolve unexplained gaps in narrative; the poem's narrative, and its extended form, seem particularly suited to postponing all these expectations, and reminding the reader at the end that they are in a permanently unresolved state when they hold a book. Robin Robertson, like Tracey Herd, tries on a different body for his long poem, 'Camera Obscura', that of the artist and photographer David Octavius Hill; but his poem is also a reminder that initial readerly expectations of characters, narrative, form or poet's stance may be questioned as the poem develops. His poem experiments with some precedents familiar to the Scottish long poem which argue that it has a certain responsibility towards its readership; these precedents are from

a more politicised debate over the long poem than Tracey Herd's poem draws attention to. In 1981, *Chapman* had put the resurgence of the Scottish long poem down to a continuing enthusiasm for MacDiarmid, carrying on a tradition of the 'unpoetic' in Scottish writing, and Joy Hendry's editorial argued that, where lyric poetry was fenced off to deal with 'expression of mood [...] of fleeting impressions', the long poem upset perceptions of lyric restriction by reviving an opportunity to demonstrate knowledge.[49] The knowledge referred to was the combination, or reuniting, of science and poetry. Stemming from MacDiarmid's project, which was to 'reject utterly all attempts to limit the scope of poetry and to try to show the modern world in relief against a background of eternal values', the Scottish poet working with a long verse form was, Joy Hendry argued, necessarily in the business of welcoming and expanding poetic and epistemological tradition.[50] Demonstrably poetic – and if demonstrable then, necessarily, scientific – the long Scottish poem by the early 1980s was expected to be a vision of fact anchored in realism rather than, as Hendry put it, the self-limiting lyric which was content with 'poetry pushed out of *this world* into an aethereal realm of rarified feeling'.[51] If the self was examined, it should be examined as simply representative of a larger body; what the articles did not particularly discuss was the formal properties of such a poem, although they heavily implied that formal issues should remain unobtrusive. Hendry described form as 'a background of eternal values' and Robert Calder relegated it to a 'range of poetic effect' subordinated to the 'experience of nature and art'.[52]

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49 Joy Hendry, Editorial, *Chapman: The Scottish Long Poem*, 30(6) (1981), 1-2 (p.1.).

50 Hendry, p.1.

51 Hendry, p.1.

52 Hendry, p.1.

Robertson's 'Camera Obscura' is described on the book jacket of *A Painted Field* as 'an extended sequence in which Robertson uses the imagined diary of the pioneering Victorian photographer David Octavius Hill – counterpointed by a contemporary poetic narrative of the city of Edinburgh'.[53] His research for the poem was extensive, and it combines sections of obvious biography of Hill with more reticent glimpses of perhaps the autobiography of a Scot living and working in London. The collection is his first, although he was involved with poetry as editor at Secker & Warburg before moving to Jonathan Cape, building a strong fiction list including a number of Scottish writers like Alan Warner and A. L. Kennedy, and a poetry list which includes Robert Crawford and John Burnside. Sean O'Brien is also quoted on the book jacket, praising the collection for its 'unyielding but sternly musical kind of poetry, firmly planted in this world but looking beyond it, too'; the comment suggests that the prominence Voigt accords to the polarity in lyric form, the interplay of structural and phonetic, of the sequential and the 'textural', may be given the same prominence in the sequence. Voigt's definition of the syntax of sequence in lyric form is about sustaining possibility, undominated by chronological ordering, in which logic is dependent on multiple meanings and positioning, not a strict unfolding of sequence and consequence. The spaces in this sequence of fragments seem more filled with lyrical reflections on light and image, but are no less disturbed by the evasion of appearances, 'deathmasks' and mirror images, than Tracey Herd's 'No Hiding Place'. The fragments which make up the poem also draw attention to the way in which they fleetingly represent other genres; prose diary entries, monologues, song lyrics, and different sorts of anachronisms which

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53 Book jacket, *APF*.

can still be recognised as evocative literary traits by a contemporary audience. Like 'No Hiding Place', the poem is also discussing its own medium, recreating the shortfall between observer and subject, and inviting the audience to consider how they respond to different genres of text.

Considering audience and genre is not something divorced from Robertson's day-job. As an editor, he has been responsible for the mainstream publication of a number of Scottish authors, and is credited with identifying and developing the talents of a generation of Scottish writers: '[t]he Godfather of Scottish literature, the uncrowned king of Britlit – epithets cling to the poet and publisher Robin Robertson', as an article from *The Times* put it.[54] Robertson, as an editor, is recognised as a specialist in identifying and nurturing new Scottish literary talent, but his own first collection of poetry was only published in 1997. After bringing so many Scottish novels, and inevitably rather fewer poetry collections, through the process of publication, his own collection certainly seems the product of a very careful observation of what audiences expect from a Scottish book, not in order to pander to those expectations but to reason with them. This added significance which is expected from Robertson's response to expectation seems to give extra weight to Bernard O'Donoghue's praise on the book jacket, when he comments that 'I can't think of any book in which you feel more confident that every word is carefully weighed and in its right place'.[55] Yet although it seems reasonable to suggest that Robertson will be more than usually alert to the issues involved in writing about the biography of a fellow Scot, the collection seems to go out

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54 Jason Cowley, 'Prickly Flower of Scotland'. *The Times*. 13 March 1997, p.33.

55 Book jacket, *APF*.

of its way to reveal that these issues are more complex, more intimate and often more unexpectedly tender than might perhaps be expected from a generation of writers often symbolised in the media by Irvine Welsh. Robertson suggested to me in interview that one reason why Scotland's prose fiction is still inclined to be more familiar than its poetry may simply be that "fiction is better copy": his first poetry collection seems to strike out deliberately against any such undiscriminating simplifications that might be made in a good news or marketing story about Scottishness.[56] As the climax of *A Painted Field*, the extended poem 'Camera Obscura' seems to relish the way in which denseness and complications of narrative in poems can, conversely, provide a clarity of focus, if only within a restricted field of vision.

The dictionary definition of a *camera obscura* is 'a darkened box [...] with an aperture for projecting an image of external objects'. The structure of Robertson's poem is similarly a way of showing how both the characters he writes about and the readers that he writes for use a medium to fragment and to contemplate external objects. The poem argues that the sequence in which its narratives develop, and the ordering of its different textures of forms and pastiches, is chance; for what is obviously a highly crafted poem, in which different sections are bound together with constant reiteration and variation, there are frequent imitations of the thought processes of a distracted speaker, or the jottings of a diary entry. Similarly, the poem is not a complete testament to everything that is contained in the darkened box which may or may not be Hill's head, or Hill's head extended into an auditorium for contemporary Edinburgh. What the poem can provide are spaces in their image. In one sense, the sequence contests a convention

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56 Interview with Robin Robertson. London. 14 December 1998.

which states that Edinburgh is merely an imitation of the civilisation which has its teleological, reflexive conclusion further south; that it is the Athens of the North, or, as Hill's voice more emphatically denies, that it is a poor imitation of London. Despite Hill's scientific analysis of the artistic images seen through the lens of his camera, it is his relationships with his subjects which are shown to be tragically wanting despite this analysis. With a hindsight which sees how Hill's life is mirrored in his inspired but unsatisfactory metaphor, Robertson's poem seems to argue that a well-intentioned vision of a country in which the combination of 'Art & Science' solves all problems is not complex enough. Hill's daughter, for example, is analysed by the artistic images and comparisons of his camera plates (at a distance, she looks like a bird, or is trapped behind glass like an image on a photographic plate), and her ill body is also analysed by the scientific vision of an X-ray; yet both images remind us that Hill can still only see her, partially, through these media, but not reach out to touch her. Consequently, the idea that a long poem can reflect national aspiration by combining a knowledge of art and science is also not complex enough; Robertson's audience might reasonably expect something more. His solution seems to be to make the narratives and styles of his poem more complicated and unpredictable, mirroring the complexities of human responses and preoccupations.

The poem draws attention to Hill's, and perhaps in oblique implication, to Robertson's analytic successes in the study of human relationships, but also to the consequent failures in the relationships themselves. It is also a subtle criticism of Hill's attempts to develop an artistic medium (like photography, or like an experiment with poetic form) which is so comprehensively successful that it will adequately see and

understand any of its subjects in the future. Robertson argues that for the artist, photographer and poet alike such a vision would be like trying to plan the structure of a political state that could be guaranteed to accommodate the unknown quantity of its future subjects. The poem is so densely written that it not possible to discuss all the ways in which he puts forward these arguments, but it is possible to look at some examples.

To start with, the poem repeatedly inverts crystal, and lenses, into a symbol of how their refraction and reflection of images is misleading; Robertson provides constant reminders of how the Camera Obscura in the centre of Edinburgh produces perfect and vivid images of its city, but still inverts those images so that they are, at the very least, providing unexpected alternatives. 'Look', says the speaker's voice at the end of the section titled 'Four Views from the Camera Obscura', 'my eyes are not my own'.[57] The speaker's means of visual perception are blatantly at odds with his understanding; the analogies and descriptive terms in this poem are going to stem from anything but a single source of vision. The glass of camera lenses, when it is turned on a city as much as on the private dilemmas of the poem, can also appear as a symbol of a colonial focus. This vision, which is inclined in the poem to suggest that any landscape could be seen as a possible addition to its empire, is hubristic and rather wistful in its rigid attempt to carry out a failed dream of the old world in the new. Its impulse towards a vision of empire is the context for both kindly and more pointed comments on how to see Edinburgh as a capital city. The section 'Atget comes to Edinburgh' observes this colonial impulse sympathetically, by examining the would-be colonialist through his own lens. The French

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57 *APF*, p.77.

photographer sights 'Paris up-ended on an old volcano, / verminous and cold' in Edinburgh, before adopting the alternative simplicity of observing what is in front of him:

> he eats the same each day: bread, milk, sugar,
>
> and takes the same position to record the seasons.
>
> They flick past and he speaks the colours:
>
> *chlorophyll, honey, cinnamon* and *bone*.[58]

Robertson seems to enjoy as well as criticise the idea of Edinburgh as the centre of its own universe, complete with the luxuries of architectural and linguistic follies which command the view from the subordinate south. Yet the more ill-fated aspects of this vision of independence are also photographed. 'Four Views from the Camera Obscura', turning Edinburgh's largest lens on itself, sees 'the empty High School [...] the dark, echoing shell of independence' beside '[t]he sooty Parthenon (unfinished)'.[59] The poem constantly provides a reminder that for the photographer Hill the artist's medium of the lens can prove unreliable; it also provides a pointed reminder that making a structure stand as a symbol of political independence, like making the old High School in Edinburgh the symbolic site of a future Scottish parliament, is not enough to achieve the political independence itself. Even though the collection was published in 1997, the year of the successful second referendum on Scottish devolution, Robertson's poem is an explicit caution against trusting that any kind of symbolic structure, including a poetic form, can change what it represents in an imaginary condition, a dream state, into something real.

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58 *APF*, p.79.

59 *APF*, p.77.

The form of the poem, and the warnings about form's limitations, are in one way the primary narrative of the poem, and the discussions of over-simplification of nationhood and the shortfall between dream and reality are constant. But the narrative that 'makes good copy' for the poem's audience, its human story, concentrates on glimpses of Hill's relationship with his daughter, as well as other father-daughter relationships which suggest a narrative of trying to grasp elusive daughters. The risk of losing the real and complicated narrative of a living child is still counterpointed by a preoccupation with form and the medium in which it is written; as Robertson describes playing with his daughter and carrying her upside-down like an imaginary set of bagpipes, his poem seems regretfully unable to prevent a comparison with the literary medium in which he works.

I walk her

to a dead march

and counterpoint her crying

with my hummed drone [...]

my cracked reed

blanking

on the high note.

the way a nib runs dry

in the rut it makes.

and splays.[60]

Not only is the poem shown to be distracted by a consideration of its own form, but the self-conscious drying-up of the pen nib suggests that it would be all too easy to follow the rather mournfully described bagpipes into 'the rut' of a cultural image which has been overused. In this case, the worn cultural image may be the connection Robertson seems tempted to draw between women and creativity, although I would argue that his treatment of the theme is more fresh because he ultimately draws attention, characteristically, to how easy it would be to oversimplify the equation of artistic fertility with the fertility of a woman's womb.

Because the biography which Robertson is writing seems to twine with his own – both Scots watching Edinburgh, both artists concerned with their media, both the fathers of young daughters – it is appropriate that, rather than looking to artistic fathers for inspiration, he turns to daughters and the female line to get out of ruts of cultural habits. Other contemporary Scottish poets have similarly expressed discomfort with the predominantly male list of literary achievements, but the topic is difficult to draw into the body of a poem without running the risk of appearing contrived; Robertson simply puts Hill's artistic struggles side by side, suggestively, with his inability to prevent the deaths of his daughter and his first wife. In the case of 'Camera Obscura', lenses and windows help to obscure or confuse a gaze which longs to see other bodies, and even suggest that it is the female bodies which are glimpsed as more creative artists, and as either unaware of the viewer or unaffected by the viewer's gaze. Wives and daughters are carefully drawn as female, in comparison with Hill's body which is not exactly male, but rather

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60 *APF*, p.62.

forlornly unfemale. The daughters' bodies seem to provide a source of music and later of the flocks of birds which curve through the poem, but like Hill's daughter in 'Primary' their fathers' technologies cannot provide the images they need to be able to see clearly ('An X-ray would have shown the shadow / on the liver').[61] They are also restricted, perhaps by the fathers' machinery of images: Hill's daughter Charlotte is an ambiguously precocious bird figure, '[w]inged before she could walk'. Charlotte is held up at a window to look out at him but 'I cannot recall her face, or any sound / only the way her fingers fell / in a flurry, beating on the glass'.[62]

However, although they suggest the possibility of escape through the reproduction of image, the promise of touch and of contact with fertility which hover round the glimpsed figures of lover, wife and daughter is always either threatened or perhaps puzzlingly inaccessible for the speaking voice. 'When I think of the womb of my daughter / – small as a thimble – I despair', Hill says ambiguously of his dead daughter, not only regretting his powerlessness over her illness but perhaps mourning his inability even to achieve such a tiny source of creative power.[63] The poem is a constant reminder that the increased clarity of vision that Hill's reproductive lenses can offer as an artist's medium is only gained at the price of their vision being limited and, perhaps, limiting. Following the story of Charlotte's death, a three-line section poses the recurrent problem of reproduction for artists, that what they produce can inevitably only be a type of image of themselves. If this were only representative of Hill's voice, the lines would merely

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61 *APF*, p.66.

62 *APF*, p.66.

63 *APF*, p.67.

express regret that his obsession with visual image cannot help him to see himself, except obliquely. But in a poem so densely packed with ambiguous phrasing, the medium of the poem could also reflect the poet, aware that it is impossible to efface himself if he is determined not to efface his medium; just as Hill's biography is discussed by means of his lenses and mirrors, Robertson's medium is bound, he admits, to reflect how his own biography is reflected in his poem.

> I look in the mirror and see nothing
>
> then turn to the window
>
> and catch myself walking away.[64]

The camera can photograph a girl in a red dress who can step easily and naturally into a tradition in which women move from being subjects of the 'forensic flash, flash of cameras' to being able (at some risk) to create and shape other bodies out of those dark, enclosed cameras, like the female 'pre-Raphaelite beauties / of Julia Margaret Cameron, / the mongols of [Diane] Arbus': the girl is free of the sinister blood ties and female inheritance of guilt in the female line that beset Herd's daughter figure.[65] But Hill's camera only gestates the prematurely stillborn twins of his subjects, whose faces all have:

> deathmasks, rising
>
> from their twins like wraiths.
>
> We have caught the *memento mori*.[66]

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64 *APF*, p.85.

65 *APF*, p.77

66 *APF*, p.74.

He doesn't quite give life, but instead he can take away death ('after long exposure / ghosts returned to their bodies [...] a perfect *memento*. The first snapshot').[67] In this snapshot, the photographer complements death (as W. N. Herbert does in *Dundee Doldrums*), replacing something lost by death without the formality or reflection of elegy – a sort of ease and naturalness which, in this context, seems disconcertingly to ignore the fact of death. 'Camera Obscura' faces down the reflexive conventions of the voice which is traditionally expected to create epic inheritance (the male, the artist who embraces the science of what he does, the immortaliser of loved figures, the assured beneficiary of a dominant culture and civilisation), and it is the unexpected turning away from focus, an abdication in favour of an obscured life, which seems to permits a release from formal and emotional obligation:

> Night breathes on me
>
> and the world mists.
>
> I make a window
>
> in the mirror
>
> for the face of my father.
>
> tired of this.[68]

It is tempting to read a similar negotiation of release from a national literary tradition into the poem, if only because of the comments in Hill's voice on cultural achievement:

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67 *APF*, p.78.

68 *APF*, p.86.

while our city is diminished, our southern sister grows apace. The price we pay for railways, better roads & speedier mail, is seeing our most able Artists & Scientists leave for London.[69]

As Robert Calder and Nancy Gish argued that the Scottish long poem should do, 'Camera Obscura' combines elements of Art and Science; yet it also hints that a formal demonstration of knowing everything, while having its own fascination of form (like Atget's Versailles), is another way of recognising how little it is possible to know with any certainty, or how easy it is to see in one form (like Atget's Edinburgh) a poor shadow of another form (Versailles). Equivalent to the demonstration of a self-examinatory organic logic in Ricks's examples of Irish reflexive lyrics, Robertson's signature of ease and sophisticated naturalness, when he combines disparate sections and forms, is the ampersand. He uses it as a delicate shorthand for his character's suspicion of aborted or abandoned creativity ('I have put down my painting **&** become an illustrator'), an interior informality which can suggest self-deception.[70] He also uses it as a revelatory reminder of the hubristic combination of knowledges in national epic which, timelessly, appear to contain '*both an end and a beginning. The very crux*'.[71] The combination of technique (as practised by both '*Artists & Scientists*') and emotional knowledge is presented on one page, the section 'May 1843: The Disruption' followed by 'May 1843: A Union'.[72] It might be equally attractive to use the form of the longer poem as a similar kind of shorthand, an easy mental association of a particular poetic

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69 *APF*, p.80.

70 *APF*, p.66.

71 *APF*, p.71

72 *APF*, p.71.

form with ideas of national achievement and self-knowledge. Yet Robertson signals that the attractions of such a formal expression of national identity are far more complicated than nostalgia might concede, when he recognises the impossibility of such a 'simple life':

> To have colours to fly and follow:
>
> a god, or rod of empire, an honourable madness;
>
> to be part of this, or some such simple life.[73]

In its constantly repeated prefiguring of the lyric's single *volta*, the poem sequence could more sensibly be termed an asequence. However, the 'perfect memento' of Hill's 'first snapshot' turns the simplicity of a public elegy mourning the unknown into something which confuses the narrative of the conventional long poem, arguing that such monolithic forms are a kind of 'honourable madness'. It therefore confuses the value of the long poem, arguing that it offers a deceptively simple understanding of national identity. In the turns of all this disparate and over-symbolic web of knowledge, ampersands represent the impossibly simple solution, an abbreviation which can only work on the printed page. The modern aftermath of combining *Art & Science*, ('sodium / and pearl') is as elegiac, perhaps more so, than Hill's mourning of both his daughter and his partner in photography, but the elegy recognises the wars that have confounded any simplified notions of nation or empire for ever:

> And the streets are bright blurs of sodium
>
> and pearl: the drawn tracery of headlamps

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73 *APF*, p.76.

smeared in long exposure. For miles west

the city stretches,

laid with vapour trails and ghosts.[74]

Like Tracey Herd's 'No Hiding Place', Robertson's sequence has a guilty fascination with debilitating beauty. The resonance of *snapshot* with a kind of impersonal expertise, an artistic sniper-fire ('drawn tracery'), detaches and confuses the purpose of elegy, breaking up sequence and proving visual memory to be unreliable. 'Camera Obscura' revolves round the idea of a dulling of pain and a sharpened appreciation of form; it combines an effortlessly beautiful tone and an ugliness of narrative action. In both poems, despite their obvious distance from one another in political context and place, this combination is reflected in the way that both poems are consciously wary of, though sympathetic towards, characters who resort to books, cameras or other ways of imitating life as an illusory escape from reality.

The final turn of 'Camera Obscura', in its last section, is apparently the heart of the poem; but in drawing together all the elements of the poem it perhaps has too much to do to retain the sort of beauty in the shorter poems of the collection. Rather than proving that the conjunction of 'Art & Science' is a realistic aspiration, for either the human artist in the shape of Hill or for a long Scottish poem, 'Camera Obscura' is compelled to die as soon as its parts are drawn into one focus, because the section is almost overburdened with the desire to pull together all the features of the poem and all its narrative strands. As the final entry of the diary Robertson has imagined for Hill, every

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74 *APF*, p.75.

element of the poem's narrative and thematic features appears in this section; the allusions to the folk-song that runs through the poem, the red and green colour-scheme reminiscent of Hill's experiments with the colour spectrum, the early drawing and painting he abandoned in favour of photography, the flowering of the Enlightenment with the elegiac reminder of the dirge 'The Flowers of the Forest', the Water of Leith, the lost daughter, glass, reflection. the importance of Edinburgh as Scotland's capital city. 'If people speak of me, say that I sang a capital song', Hill asks, trying to capture his own *memento mori*; Robertson has given his subject a habit of speaking wistfully through significant anachronisms which is potent in the rest of the poem, showing his small but significant failures in grasping the time in which he lives.[75] This reminder of the importance of Hill to Edinburgh's history, though, seems to struggle to accommodate such ambivalence, because the Hill we have met so far may be unwittingly at fault for some of his ambitiously patriotic simplifications, but is not inclined to simplify his speech to the slang of boys' school stories. The final paragraph of the section ends: 'A drawing of us all together. Drawing with light, the saddest art: the music of what's gone. Into the turning green.'[76] The prose reads as if the old man is simply babbling about everything he remembers, yet there are too many reminders of the point we have consequently reached in the poem's structure to be able to accept this speech as both artless monologue and crafted poem.

If this penultimate moment of the poem, Robertson seems to argue, were really trying to be the kind of Scottish poem which demonstrates a knowledge of everything,

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75 *APF*, p.87.

76 *APF*, p.87.

it would be able to approach the climax of the biographical narratives as well as a climactic resolution of artistic themes ('drawing of us all together'), before the turn or volta of the poem towards the poet's explicit explanation of his conceits ('the turning green'). But what Robertson then offers in place of an omniscient explanation by the poet is a found poem; without anything further, the poem ends with yet another sort of text, the inscription of Hill's gravestone written by someone who really knew him, 'HIS SECOND WIFE / AMELIA ROBERTSON PATON'.[77] Even the most artfully constructed poem, this collection seems to argue, can only be completed by the perspective of another's vision, although the poet is bound to be implicated in this case by the inclusion of his family name; the art lies ultimately not in detailed research or skill within a particular medium, but in knowing when to give way, and when to accept that the work is best left incomplete. This final diagnosis of incompletion seems to be Robertson's solution to the problem of making a satisfyingly complex long Scottish poem; he proposes that it should be restructured as a series of fragmented styles, even exposing any moments of unrealistic vision, rather than claiming an ultimately unconvincing sense of cohesion for either the form or the country it could so temptingly be held to represent.

In '19:00: Auchterhouse', Don Paterson places his sonnet's turn as a diagnostic conclusion to the sestet, as if making clear that the guilty relationships between form and subject are always going to refer readers back to a certain level of self-consciousness about the medium:

> Gail is lightly braced against the sink.

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77 *APF*, p.[89].

her face burning, her skirt bunched round her middle
while I try to effect the painless removal
of the inch-long skelf, buried in her flank.
I will not be disturbed: this is heart surgery,
and might well take me an eternity.[78]

The heart of the poem, like many in this sequential collection, is terminally about-to-be-broken, but the moment is permanently put off. The concentration required for the delicately bathetic 'heart surgery' seems split equally between the recognition of a barely oblique admiration for the object of the poem (Gail), the subject (the memory of youthful yet solemn adoration) and for the fascination of mastering a form: the construction of the perfect sonnet is itself 'heart surgery / and might well take me an eternity'. The subject and the object are only given a temporary place in the present tense, because they are obviously memory; what is here and now, the poem argues, is 'this' – not the remembered emotions, but the way that the poet operates on them. The sonnet's turn is therefore an explicit and knowing revelation that its conceit can plot to prolong confusion and perhaps authorial evasion ('I will not be disturbed'). As Paterson's statement in the *Dream State* anthology concluded, '[f]or me, bad poems try to offer solutions, while good poems leave a little more chaos, mystery, fear or wonder in the world than there was before'.[79] But like Robertson's poem, Paterson's poems use that opening up of complexity as a way to increase knowledge. To use the sonnet form in this poem simply as a way of discussing a memory of young love would be to see the poem

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78 Don Paterson, '19:00: Auchterhouse', *God's Gift to Women* (London: Faber, 1997), p.52.

79 *Dream State*, p.168.

as an analysis of what is past. But to acknowledge that the form is now used not purely as a love poem but to pivot that tenacious and loving gaze towards the medium of the poem itself, is to acknowledge that the sonnet is as much knowledge poem as love poem. As persistently as Robertson's 'Camera Obscura', Don Paterson's poems are aware of how knowledge, and love, of form are diagnostic as well as guilt-laden.

Reviewing an anthology of sonnets edited by Don Paterson, Kathleen Jamie observed that an ambiguous virtue of the sonnet form is that it is 'nothing if not dogged'. It refuses to become extinct because of its recurrent formal challenge, which Jamie defined as the temptation of a recognisable sort of narrative with its 'twist in the plot' and its musical, aural satisfactions; she counted herself as one of those resisting readers who 'associate sonnets with the smug, caressing sound of the form' (although she concluded that 'I hate to admit it but they have a certain magic').[80] But this is not a sonnet from an introverted collection; form and the way it operates are constantly referred to, but in order to expose, if not resolve, the dilemmas that result. These poems also argue that trying to effect the removal of pain from the memorial function of a poem, whatever its length, is unavoidable but inevitably never succeeds. Like Tracey Herd, Don Paterson was creative writer in residence at the University of Dundee, and like Robin Robertson, has also become the poetry editor of a London-based publisher; as well as Robin Robertson, Picador's list now includes Kathleen Jamie (*Jizzen*, 1998). *God's Gift to Women* (1997), even more than Paterson's first collection *Nil Nil* (1993), plays within the framework of a sequence, propelling the collection along with allusions

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80 Kathleen Jamie, 'Sonnets that put the popularity into poetry', *Sunday Herald*, 3 October 1999, p.11, a review of Faber poetry anthologies edited by Simon Rae, Simon Armitage and Don Paterson.

to possible revelation; I am treating the collection as a sequence here not least because of the formal interventions of the railway poems. *God's Gift to Women* is counterpointed by Paterson's third collection, *The Eyes* (1999), which has similar preoccupations with combining collection and sequence, but as a translation of poems by Antonio Machado it is, perhaps characteristically of much of his work so far, achieving both an apparently homogenous identity and an ultimately evasive voice. Revealing how a poem is engineered does not, as in many of these Scottish poets' work, necessarily reveal the engineer.

A series of insistently titled poems in *God's Gift to Women* seems, initially, distracting and an obstacle to the piecing together of the collection. '10:45 Dundee Ward Road', '00:00: Law Tunnel', '11:00 Baldovan' and similarly-titled poems cut backwards and forwards across the collection; remembering how these forgotten tracks work suggests the uncovering of a paradoxically forgotten memorial, although less explicit than the memorial stone on the final page of 'Camera Obscura'. This dream litany of extinct stations, which the accusatory subtitle to '14:50: Rosekinghall' calls 'The Beeching Memorial Railway', provides the instinctive machinery of the collection. They act as the turning-table of the sequence, necessary for all good old-fashioned railways; the *volta* is used to swivel the locomotives from seeing the innocence, vulnerability and boyhood in masculinity to guilt about its manipulative sophistries and back again. The poems making up the train are credited in the book as having begun life grouped together as 'the Dundee-Newtyle poems', written for a television documentary. Subsequently spread out through the collection, they provide both escape from, and a vehicle for, different sorts of guilt: the cover photograph epitomises how the intrusion

of the train device simultaneously deflects and focuses attentions towards subjects who appear, like Gail, as the subjects of a vision which is intent on formal properties but fears their distraction.

Like Robertson's `Camera Obscura', the guilt in *God's Gift to Women* may seem to be prompted by the subject of wasted sorts of love, whether in the sexuality of the title or in the modifications of possessive, imperial, unrealised or unshared loves that wind through the various relationships of the collection. Also like Robertson's poem, the sense of guilt eventually seems to do with a closer pursuit of textual knowledge and poetic forms than the human relationships which seem to be the main focus of the collection. A family relationship is memorialised by an analogy with a piece of textual apparatus ('Addenda: Scott Paterson b.-d. Oct '65'), one of many missing halves in the poems, presenting the arbitrary laws of literary form as providing the relief of distraction; formal patterns are shown to be incapable of containing, or consoling, the range of human experience, as a poem like 'Scale of Intensity' shows in its twelve degrees for measuring destruction, but there is a sneaking desire to appreciate form while identifying its faultlines. The collection makes, and then questions, a religion of an architectural symmetry, and having made the religion provides guilt at the appropriations of religious analogy by an obsessive artisanship; it also prompts some equivocal comments which concentrate on its often disturbing accounts of (hetero)sexual relationships, or of the 'laddish' or egotistical ring to much of its subject matter.[81] Yet as Robert Crawford's review of the collection argued, it is more centrally controlled by a sometimes 'appalling verbal felicity' and, at its heart, a 'Calvinistic' approach to lost faith and lyrical

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81 See Ruth Padel, 'The Sunday Poem: 22', *Independent on Sunday*, 9 May 1997, p.11.

constructions: '[i]f women tend to appear in the poems only to be fucked and fought, God disappears only to be gazed after with wittily shielded despair'.[82] One could also say that along with God has disappeared any sense that the poems can exist in a state of unawareness about the contested roles of author and reader. The prologue predicts a captive audience for the roller-coaster of even the most sheepishly deployed lyric forms ahead – 'A poem is a little church, remember / you its congregation, I its cantor':

> Fear not: this is spiritual transport,
>
> albeit the less elevated sort:
>
> while the coach will limp towards its final stage
>
> beyond the snowy graveyard of the page,
>
> no one will leave the premises.[83]

The poems may express a regret that the roles of congregation and cantor will inevitably be pressed on the reader, but, like the sonnet '19:00: Auchterhouse', it is impossible to read some of the poems and not realise that the structure of the collection and its formal history are put forward as an agenda equal to the poems' discussions of relationships. In this sense, the poet has just said (as Paterson says he longed for during school poetry lessons) exactly what he means.

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82 Robert Crawford, 'Deep Down in the Trash', *London Review of Books*, 19(16), 21 August 1997, p.26.

83 'Prologue', *GGW*, p.1.

Yet from that starting-point to the final poem of the collection, which is lost and buried at the end of the book by being excluded from the notes or index, there is an almost desperate sense of future possibility in formal engineering; writer and reader (whatever the distinctions between the two roles) might be able to escape beyond the boundaries of the printed page. 'The Chartres of Gowrie' offers a futuristic fantasy of escape. A culturally revered structure, again a church, is brought into being by an elusive orchestrator:

> No witness, then, and so we must imagine
> everything, from the tiny crystal-stack,
> its tingling light-code, the clear ripple of tines,
> the shell snapping awake, the black rock
> blooming through its heart like boiling tar,
>
> to the great organ at dawn thundering away
> half-a-mile up in the roof, still driving
> each stone limb to its own extremity
> and still unmanned, though if we find this hard
> we may posit the autistic elder brother
>
> of Maurice Duruflé or Messiaen.
> Whatever, the reality is this:
> at Errol, Grange, Longforgan, and St Madoes

they stand dumb in their doorframes, all agog

at the black ship moored in the sea of corn.[84]

The 'unmanned' lines are partly the hybrid nature of the machinery, part a cyber-fantasy of LEDs ('tingling light-code'), and part natural stone-limbed phenomenon. The complex but architecturally symmetrical poem ('a little church, remember') is unmanned in both the sense that it has reached a mooring not unpiloted but with no obvious pilot, and in the suggestion that the invasive discovery of its act of creation will unman or emasculate whatever is discovered at its heart.

Like the wider swathes cut through the collection by its more recurrent technologies of gender, this vehicle cuts an irregular and guilty syntactic swathe through its four five-line stanzas. What is discovered is that the poem is reliant on the fascinating and futuristic engineering of its performance. In this poem, there is explicitly an 'unmanning'; there is no cantor or congregation, to use the analogy in the prologue. The collection recognises the debates about the role a reader plays in making a text come to life, and about the death or not of the author, and is scathing about the way in which these debates can be over-analysed (a poem called 'Postmodern' describes theoretical attitudinising as a public revelation of masturbation and ends snidely, 'Will Eh hae tae / *explain* it tae ye?').[85] 'The Chartres of Gowrie' is therefore about a tantalising possibility; it suggests that a poetic structure can exist without these debates making any significant mark on it. If such a situation were possible, the poem argues, then only response to being controlled by a formal structure would be for the powerless observers to 'stand

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84 *GGW*, p.11.

85 'Postmodern', *GGW*, p.51.

dumb' in front of its surreally unexpected delivery. The situation does not seem to be possible, but that does not mean that it is impossible to imagine a poetic structure which exists without a reliance on author, audience or narrative.

Paterson's next collection, *The Eyes*, seems to provide, in its additional facets of translation and levels of remove from authorship, a further warning about trying to hunt out the elusive author. The Afterword warns immediately against reading the poet's medium as shaped by his life:

> [r]eading a poet through the lens of his or her biography is a dubious practice at the best of times [...] I can think of no writer so obsessed with the suppression of his own ego, and he would have been disappointed in any reader who sought to 'explain' a poem in terms of a geographic or psychological provenance.[86]

The evasive writer there is Antonio Machado. *The Eyes* is a collection which, like *God's Gift to Women*, can also be seen as an extended poem, because it is all written in the voice of Machado, either in translations of his poems or poems by Paterson in the spirit of Machado. The whole collection is attributable, as the sequential confessions of a sustained sequence, to a consistently assumed voice, and its apparent singularity defines the poems as a complete sequence, rather than individual lyrics: 'There are several Antonio Machados, but I've only tried to write the poem Machado is for me [...] to that extent this book is really one poem'.[87] This level of remove, and its arrangement as a sequence by alphabetical order of title in transparent courtesy to a formal syntax, seems

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86 Afterword, *The Eyes* (London: Faber, 1999), pp.55-60 (p.55).

87 Afterword, *The Eyes*, p.55.

to offer escape from the more hectic racing through the labyrinths of *Nil Nil* and *God's Gift to Women*; there is more opportunity for relaxed and lucid moments of scrutiny. Yet the knotty problems of the isolation of the writer's gaze are still there, as they are in 'Marginal Notes' which is preoccupied with the capacity of form for obstructing value:

> Half-rhymes on verbs,
> rhymes on time-words –
> they're most precious.
> Nouns and adjectives
> are knots in a clear stream,
> slow or slowing verbs
> in that lyric grammar
> where today is tomorrow,
> yesterday, still.[88]

Yet guilt in this sequence is often examined at one remove. Its stories are fables of absolution, where if Ellen Voigt's definition of narrative holds true ('each action in sequence [closing] out the possibilities for each succeeding action') narrative tends to have a more authoritative hand; once the poem reaches a certain point in its narrative, the guilt about spending time on form is absolved.[89] Admiring and preserving the beauty of a formal problem is no longer shown as existing in a state of tantalising possibility, as it is in 'The Chartres of Gowrie'. The writer is only temporarily hindered by the

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88 'Marginal Notes', *The Eyes*, pp.15-16 (p.16).

89 Voigt, p.182.

temptation of making something beautiful out of enclosing formal structures:

> In my room, brilliant
>
> with the pearl-light
>
> of winter, strained
>
> through cloud and glass and rain,
>
> I dream and meditate.
>
> The clock
>
> glitters on the wall.[90]

The problem here, which seems to have been overcome, is not really guilt about paying as much, or more attention to form than to the events and people in the narrative of the poem. The problem is that too much time can be taken up in considering beautiful problems ('the clock glitters'). In Tracey Herd's long poem, time was deliberately fought by means of the escapist fantasies of reading, and that included the extension of the whole poem by means of the protagonist desperately reading a fantasy novel. It seems that Paterson's view of the problem is that the longer each poem spends in contemplating its own form ('I dream and meditate'), the more the very beautiful poem can actually decrease in value.

As a younger poet, he may have criticised poems that are too showily self-conscious and 'anticipate the arguments they raise in the course of telling themselves', but this comment might now apply to his dealings with the overly-contemplative poem

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90 '*from* One Day's Poem', *The Eyes*, pp.21-25 (p.22).

as much as to the showily witty or theoretically-aware poem.[91] One of his solutions is to continue to remove authorial presence abruptly and pointedly; 'from One Day's Poem' ends briskly with the words 'The rain's slacking off. / Umbrella, hat, gaberdine, galoshes... / Right. I'm out of here'.[92] Another is that, although these collections are very similar to the idea of the longer poem we can see in Robertson's or Herd's writing, the separate sections of the collection are still more recognisable as separate poems in their own right. This is a relatively contemporary approach to the poetry collection as a coherent whole. Each of Paterson's collections is organised by all sorts of textual patterns, like the alphabetical ordering of poems in *The Eyes*, or the hidden extra poem in *God's Gift to Women* which is not listed in the contents page. But despite leaving all the poems as independent parts of the collections, and pointedly distancing poem from author, the sense of guilt over form does not always seem to be absolved. In the definitively-titled 'Poem', it is clear that for this poet part of the attraction of making a perfectly-shaped beautiful object like a formally symmetrical poem, or like a pearl, is that the beautiful object is then distanced from its maker:

> I want neither glory
> nor that, in the memory
> of men, my songs survive;
> but still ... those subtle worlds,
> those weightless mother-of-pearl
> soap-bubbles of mine ... I just love
> the way they set off, all tarted up
> in sunburst and scarlet, hover
> low in the blue sky, quiver,
> then suddenly pop.[93]

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91 *Dream State*, p.168.

92 '*from* One Day's Poem', *The Eyes*, p.25.

93 'Poem', *The Eyes*, p.27.

The verbal sense of the poem is an elegy, letting the poem die once a suitably perfect pearl form has been constructed for it. Enough seems to be enough. But through the visual syntax, in the patterns which make sense in the formal life of the page rather than the life of the narrative, the poem has uncannily floated back in the shape of an eye. The poem can be released so completely from the control of its author that its form is free to form a kind of independent scrutiny.

Perhaps we can accept the suggestions in *Chapman* that encompassing these sorts of aesthetic doubts and double-takes, within a framework of preoccupations over the individual's context in a national narrative, is most appropriate in the long or extended poem. But whatever their length, these poems represent a metaphor of their construction. Thomas Docherty describes this kind of explicit revelation of structural metaphor as 'modernist demystification' and argues that it has been supplanted by postmodern 'possibilities of [aural] enchantment'. Docherty concludes that, therefore, when the 'possibilities of enchantment' remain, then the work and its interpretation have 'no root and no landing: a state of exile without territory'.[94] Tracey Herd, Robin Robertson, Don Paterson and also Robert Crawford recurrently deal with the problems of perfecting an often beautiful problem out of narrative, which can be linked to a metaphor of a dream state; the poets are aware of the desire, as Paterson warns, 'to "explain" a poem in terms of psychological or geographical provenance'.[95] The beautiful, hard problem also appears as a covering for some degree of violence or turmoil, like the description of Hill's beautifully visualised Edinburgh in one section of 'Camera Obscura'

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94 Docherty, p.176.

95 Afterword, *The Eyes*, p.55.

as a theatre of war which 'comes alight / as if each building's shell / has a fire inside that burned'.[96] But the form of the extended sequence is not principally used as an allegory of fragmentation; if the form constitutes a reflection of authorial intent, it is in the way it represents the protection of an opaque shell round the gradual mutability going on beneath. The struggles with form in these poems is a direct negotiation to keep poetic form intellectually and aurally challenging and absorbing, but to use it in a communal reading of the dream state and of formal inheritance.

Robert Crawford's poetry is also motivated in part by the idea that turmoil within the notion of the dream state is not destructive but an opportunity for change. I will discuss how one of his earliest published poems and one of his most recent poems explore the longer poem in order to discuss the multiplicity of Scottish art and science. As in the work of the other poets in this chapter, the dream state is often sustained in his poetry by form, and by an intensity more familiarly devoted to the love lyric. However, rather than concentrating on completely removing an authorial presence from poems, like Paterson, or on explaining how a single author (or artist) is necessarily fallible, like Robertson, Crawford often crowds his poems with different voices. More than one agent or voice in a poem is part of his approach to devising a nationally-conscious poetics, because only by showing such a variety of speakers can the poems reflect that modern Scotland is made up of a vast number of influences and a disparate range of opinions. He was asked in an interview, 'not Who is Robert Crawford, but who are the Robert Crawfords?', which he declined to answer directly but included in the response an admiring reference to Edwin Morgan: 'writing a variety of different kinds of poem in a

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96 'Dumb Show, with Candles', *APF*, pp.74-75 (p.75).

variety of different sorts of voices [...] appeals to me strongly'.[97] The plurality was a reference to Bakhtin, an explicit influence in Crawford's work as a critic of Scottish literature and culture in his position as professor of Modern Scottish Literature at the University of St Andrews. The titles of his critical work explain his interests: he has written monographs on T. S. Eliot, and on *Devolving English Literature* (1992), *Identifying Poets: Self and Territory in Twentieth-Century Poetry* (1993) and edited books on *The Scottish Invention of English Literature* (1998) and on the work of Edwin Morgan, Alasdair Gray, Douglas Dunn, Liz Lochhead and Robert Burns. The personae of academic and poet are, of course, both involved in his work as an anthologist: *The Modern Poet* (2001) confirms his view of the closeness of the two roles and their influence on one another. In the same interview, he discussed how his work as a poet and as an academic were very close. The focus of some of the critical work is the tradition of Scottish universities' 'teaching of composition [...] bound up with the creation of poetry' which 'seems to me something that was lost when English was, if you like, reinvented in Oxbridge':

> So I suppose I'm now more interested in looking back again to some sense of tradition, but to a tradition which has somehow gone underground and then resurfaced, a tradition which involves a working together of academic knowledge with the creative imagination.[98]

The two complementary definitions of tradition, in fact, provide a framework for many of his poems. The definitions of tradition are, like his criticism, often about (re)inventing

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97 Andrew Zawacki, 'Robert Crawford: An Interview', *Verse*, 15 (1998), pp.38-54 (p.44).

98 Zawacki, p.42.

Scotland, and through a sometimes fiercely explicit championing of the varieties of language and experience current in modern Scotland. It is also influenced by a career which moved him as a student from Glasgow to six years at Oxford for D.Phil. research on T. S. Eliot and a junior fellowship, before returning to Scotland. Like Paterson's operation on the sonnet form, turning it from love poem to knowledge poem, Crawford has based his poems about national invention and reinvention on the idea of the love poem.

His two longer poems that I will discuss are separated by nearly twenty years, and what is to some extent a reinvention of the early poem by the later is an example of ideas about language which he developed in his five intervening collections. The poet Robert Crawfords are active throughout the five collections and in earlier published poems. *Sharawaggi* (1990) was shared with W. N. Herbert who was a fellow postgraduate student at Oxford; it is militant in its insistence that Scots and Scotland are neither inferior nor old-fashioned, and 'The Flyting of Crawford and Herbert' is a vigorous duel which epitomises the energy of the collection.[99] Poems in Scots are equally comfortable with the satirical or the beautiful and are usually translated, though frequently into a po-faced English or dense footnoting which is equivalent to creative mistranslation. Like Edwin Morgan's poems, Crawford's often take their principal energy from a vocabulary which sometimes seems insatiable, creating convincing sounds like words when there are no words to hand. The vocabulary and the voices that use it in subsequent collections come from technology, the internet, the history of science, languages, literatures, autobiography and family, pastoral convention, while characters

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99 Robert Crawford and W. N. Herbert, 'The Flyting of Crawford and Herbert', *Sharawaggi: Poems in Scots* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990), pp.25-30.

moonlighting from the novels of P.G. Wodehouse, E. W. Hornung or Ian Fleming are variously marshalled into reiving parties on the hinterlands of the Scottish National Dictionary. These early *Sharawaggi* poems are particularly gleeful about sound, often rowdy and, literally, not ashamed of the sound they make; the first poem threatens the ghetto of literary Scots with 'the raucus sweet soon o oor Ghetto-Blastir'.[100]

A Scottish Assembly (1990) was Crawford's first solo collection; in 1990 the title perhaps suggested an allegory of political fantasy, in that by assembling a collection of poems it would be possible to create a place of debate, a poetic version of the proposed Scottish Assembly. It was followed by *Talkies* in 1992, particularly concerned with the acquisition of language and with finding confidence in speech, which was selected as part of the New Generation promotion. *Masculinity* (1996) is strongly involved with questioning of male identity and with father-son relationships. He may have been influenced by the expectations of readers in either his academic career or during the increasing number of public readings of his poems, when he described the collection in an interview as a conscious attempt to write in a style which 'you could give to people who weren't "poetry readers" [...] without completely compromising a sense of tonality and emotional complexity in the poems'.[101] The most recent collection, *Spirit Machines* (1999) differs from earlier collections in some ways, although it draws on a lot of elements and contains, in 'Impossibility', a reworking of a substantial poem published in *Akros* in 1981. It also refers, specifically in the title sequence, to Robert Crawford's father who died in 1997, as well as to the children first mentioned in

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100 Robert Crawford, 'Ghetto-Blastir', *Sharawaggi*, pp.12-13 (p.13.).

101 Zawacki, p.46.

Masculinity. No poem remains under one influence, or one genre, for long, but the following types are often in evidence. There is a flyting style, which is familiar from *Sharawaggi*. There is the prose poem, either accompanied by, or with the feel of, a translation; the earlier examples of these, particularly in *Sharawaggi*, may be ironical in the way they play versions off one another but are not ironical in aiming for a complete conviction of tone. There are love poems, a complex plaiting of genres between biographical detail and symbolic resonance. There is the largely personal and autobiographical, some confessional in style like many of the poems of *Masculinity*. There are poems which are a jumble of dramatic monologues often to parodic extent, reminiscent of class espionage Flashman-style; yet these voices also seem a kind of oblique love poem towards the pathos of the figures who are parodied. The monologue style is very close to the admiring historical reinventions of Scottish intellectuals and inventors, and often literally revisions Scottish landscape as the context of the inventor's imagination ('Scanning the universe from Helensburgh / You saw the Comet first in your own mind').[102]

I want to look particularly here at the rhetorical aspect of reinvention in the collections, and how it contributes to this poet's way of dealing with the beautiful, hard problem of form. For example, there is a specific sort of combination of invention with the reinvention of the love poem. 'Invention' is for these collections a consistent double interest. The inventions of technology are often used not only as a demonstration of hard worth in national achievement and skill, but also as a means of drawing together people, assembling them and bringing them closer, as particularly the poems in *Talkies* play on

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102 'Henry Bell Introduces Europe's First Commercial Steamship', *A Scottish Assembly* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990), p.21.

the intimacies of the lover's voice broadcast through a machine. The drawing together can be of a people ('Today I have heard the feet of my country / break into a run'), or of two particular people ('Through the machine I hear your Glasgow accent, / Your voiceprint. I just called to say'), but it is deliberately almost impossible to separate love poem from landscape, or landscape from cityscape.[103] 'Scotland' is addressed as 'Semiconductor country, land crammed with intimate expanses', where:

> To be miniaturised is not small-minded.
>
> To love you needs more details than the Book of Kells –
>
> Your harbours, your photography, your democratic intellect
>
> Still boundless, chip of a nation.[104]

However, the other sense of *invention* is related to rhetoric, the part of oratory where the speaker reveals the subjects that are developed in the argument, and it is used throughout the collections in a way that is perhaps unexpected but not illogical for an Eliot scholar. The challenge of finding a persuasive register for a contemporary audience is joined with the cerebrally challenging energy of a classical discipline, intended to win over those who might object to the assumption of a communal pool of knowledge of canonical literature or references to Greek.

If a polysyllabic word is lurking in the opening lines of the poems in English, then even if it is not obviously drawing attention to itself by being a new coinage, it is likely to be of Greek or Latin derivation, partly because it is the language of invention.

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103 'Radio Scottish Democracry', *Talkies* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), p.26; 'A Saying', *ASA*, p.29.

104 'Scotland', *ASA*, p.42.

Telephone, television, technology, electronics are all combined in *A Scottish Assembly* in which Scotland is a classically-informed space; 'Your cities are superlattices, heterojunctive / Graphed from the air, your cropmarked farmlands / Are epitaxies of tweed'.[105] In some cases (as is pointed out by the unfussy Gaelic adoption of the word 'video' in 'Bhidhio') there is little point in reinventing or transliterating a word of classical origin which is comfortably adopted and domesticated, has no pompously jargony connotations. But although Greek and Latin phrases, and their descendants, are frequently in use to question or evoke the sometimes alienating effects of having to learn how to speak in institutional and other tongues, much of the collection is about finding a voice, and relearning or making a new voice. For example, Greek words and references to Greek literature are allowed to slip into poems of intimate diction, and Greek emerges as a fathering resource of language, in 'Impossibility', 'Spirit Machines', and also in poems like 'Hyndland'. Its rhetoric aids the inventor ('Ferrier invents the word *epistemology*'), but also aids him in expressing the startlingly new and personal concept.[106] In 'Oral', the poem recalls learning Greek in the same context as the child watching the father learn to speak:

carrying

Homer from school in your bag, going back

To dad in his worn chair by the phone

With his mouth open, snoring

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105 'Scotland', *ASA*, p.42.

106 'Knowledge', *Spirit Machines* (London: Cape, 1999), p.13.

Before he woke up sharply, almost choking

When he started, as miraculously

As the baby you'd been, lying there, watching,

Swallowing, beginning to talk.[107]

'Impossibility' is an extended poem, and a reworking of a very early poem in which Robert Crawford had been 'learning to talk' in 1979-80. Its main protagonist is the nineteenth-century novelist Margaret Oliphant, struggling to combine her working life and support her children, but her 'I' easily takes on the personas of other and more authorial voices; it is impossible, and unnecessary, to define a voice which recites the variety of 'Ich bin Margaret Oliphant / Je suis Margaret Oliphant / I am Margaret Oliphant / You are Margaret Oliphant'.[108] The poem is set in the impossible context of an underwater existence, with Oliphant's voice drifting through the water off the east coast of Scotland. In contrast to the endless narrative mutability, the poem is divided into 6-line stanzas, 60 of them, so that there are 360 lines of which the last reads '360°'. 'Since "Margaret"="pearl"', as the poem points out, there is a particular thread throughout the poem of the contrasts between the everyday muddle of Oliphant's writing work, the beauty of working to impose or uncover form, and the final insistence on the poem's formal symmetries seems a defiant claim to self-sufficiency.[109] In this poem, the problem of the guilty distractions provided by the absorbing challenges of poetic form are located in a pearl imagery. Suspended in an amniotic dreamworld, the idea of a

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107 'Oral', *Talkies*, p.79.

108 'Impossibility', *SM*, pp.43-55 (p.43).

109 *SM*, p.51.

beautiful and complete form, the pearl (or the all-encompassing 360° poem) is a paradox of the beautiful thing which, even when explained from the inside (and the poem is full of internalising language), is still puzzling; it creates an enigmatic, even alien, and beautiful surface of even the most apparently simple statement – 'Ich bin Margaret Oliphant / Je suis Margaret Oliphant'. But the poem is not simply about creating beauty; it is about observing creativity, being caught up in it, and being observed back. Although beneath the waves it is possible to say that 'I am a father and a mother', acknowledging different elements of character, and even the impossibility of Oliphant's being both figures to her children, it is never quite possible to avoid either an awareness of Oliphant's preoccupyingly literary livelihood or an awareness of the pearls in the poem.[110] Avoidance is in fact not necessary, in that the pearl is a device which represents the overcoming of difficulty.

The pearl is perhaps particularly a symbol of invention, or reinvention, of formal and thematic presences for Crawford; 'Impossibility' echoes and reconsiders a five-section poem called 'Pearls', which was written when he was an undergraduate at Glasgow and published in *Akros* in 1981. In the following issue of *Akros* he explained the sequence as written in protest at 'a persisting attitude which says that certain types of vocabulary are inherently unpoetic', asking 'Is there not a poetic "excitement" (to use Wordsworth's word) latent in contemporary biology or archaeology?' and referring to MacDiarmid's ambitious approach to incorporating scientific knowledge in a long poem.[111] Crawford also commented on a fascination with poetry which incorporates

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110 *SM*, p.54.

111 Robert Crawford, 'Myself and poetry', *Akros* 16(48), December 1981, 65-68 (pp.65-66).

'history and tradition', partly in the sense of canonical tradition (referring to 'half-knowledge' of contemporary and classical Greek literature). Since in 1981 Chapman was also in favour of a conjunction of art and science in the long Scottish poem, his article was in tune with a wider interest in the appropriate languages, form and subjects for Scottish poetry. 'Pearls' uses this, with the occasional scholarly Greek archaism ('bathyscaphes') while the narrative voice struggles, in the formality of Greek tragedy, with the 'hubristic' in his attempt to address his ancestors. More importantly, as he wrote in the 1981 *Akros* article he had, and still has, an interest in the memorial function of poems which incorporate some sort of archaeological retrieval of earlier pieces:

> I like poems which resemble carved stones rather than water out of a bucket. Often I feel that I am writing a poem which might have the memorial functions of a stone [...] if not a stone's durability.[112]

Greek quotations appear directly only a few times in all his poems, and both as a memorial of intimacy to his father. However, Greek appears much more often as part of an inventive language, and this is what 'Pearls' is about; retrieving and memorialising a heritage, personal and of national history, as something contemporary. In a tone which is reminiscent of MacDiarmid's more information-filled poems, 'Pearls' is about the retrieval of a personal and national creativity from the depths of memory; in 'Pearls' as in 'Impossibility', the depths are represented by the sea. The figures the poem addresses are 'my ancestors' and 'my grandmother', an elusive memory of a woman; like Robin Robertson's much later poem about Hill, creativity is associated with matriarchal power. The idea of pearls as inheritance which has to be retrieved is deployed as clear allegory

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112 'Myself and poetry', p.67.

('seed pearls, plankton-small, which would make up / New cultures').[113] But there is the beginning of the mutability which is developed in 'Impossibility', of a female and transformative world:

> So, in your oceans,
>
> My ancestors, might poems not go down
>
> To plumb your depths, coming back up again
>
> Altered by what was there, weird bathyscaphes
>
> Surfacing coated totally with mother-
>
> Of-pearl, themselves new pearls, sea-changed and made again?[114]

'Surfacing coated totally with mother-' seems a more pointed line-break than a decision simply to conform to what is already established as a moderately flexible pentameter line. In 'Impossibility', there are multiple references to the inventions of addressing, or reaching out, to a crowd, recalling his comment in the first edition of *Dream State* that he wanted 'a four-wheel drive poetry [...] that could go into all sorts of territories, and go there with a big audience'.[115] Stanza 11 perhaps echoes the temporary tone of despair that invention is only 'hubristic' in 'Pearls', by recalling a passage from Xenophon where the Greeks have been in danger of permanent rootlessness and finally sight the sea with its promise of being about to reach home:

> When Alexander Diving Bell invented the xenophone

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113 Robert Crawford, 'Pearls', *Akros* 16(46), April 1981, 25-28 (p.27).

114 'Pearls', p.26.

115 *Dream State*, p.61.

I heard his voice calling, 'The sea! The sea!'

Hollowly into a shell

As if he could contact Robert Louis Verne

Or all the impossible, massed, forlorn spirits

Edinburgh exiled.[116]

The gap of nearly twenty years' writing experience between 'Pearls' and the *Akros* article and the publication of 'Impossibility' is obvious, although it is clear that they share an interest in the use of form and the precision of verbal invention to control the more watery aspects of narrative. In the first poem, 'seed-pearls' are the object of a scientist's research, capable of producing 'new cultures'; in the second, they appear in the womb-like protection of a Victorian study where 'stashed seed pearls in a dish / Radiate homely, incarnational light'. The prominently cerebral vocabulary that is so important in 'Pearls' surfaces again from early in 'Impossibility'; for example Margaret Oliphant's study is a 'bathyscaphic den', and the final line of 'Pearls, 'tiny globes of light', is commemorated in 'Impossibility'.[117] The end of 'Pearls' also spells the beginning of 'Impossibility', by demonstrating how knowledge can be revisited or inherited, and salvaged in a different form:

I seem to glimpse you, meet you, grandmother [...]

Then and only then,

When you have vanished from all knowledge, sunk

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116 *SM*, p.45.

117 *SM*, p.43; *SM*, p.51.

Apparently beyond the reach of words,

Can you return, sea-changed and unfamiliar,

And, ceased to be a part of speech, become

Closer than words, but changed, as the dead must be,

To terra incognita, mist, the gulf

From which come back those tiny globes of light.[118]

The older poet can plunder an earlier piece of knowledge, and put it through a sea-change – a shadowy grandmother is replaced by the more crisply-defined persona of Margaret Oliphant, the voice of the poem shifts from an observational stance to embodying its protagonist, the idea of national invention is more securely moulded round the idea of Oliphant's and Crawford's narratives. The form of the older poem is superseded ('changed, as the dead must be') by a newer form, and nowhere more mercilessly than by a poet returning to rework one of his own early poems. The idea of 'own', in this poem, is displayed in the poet's double ownership of both the new poem and its source. In more ways than one, this pair of poems echoes Ricks's definition of the reflexive: 'that which goes beyond saying of something that it *finds* its own resemblance, and says instead, more wittily and more mysteriously, that something *is* its own resemblance'.[119] The potential for the reflexive figure to show dissent or division in its own form is not, in 'Impossibility', exploited as a metaphor of damaged or rebuffed confidence in a national or personal knowledge, but as a strength. Yet neither poem offers to release the reader, or the writer, from the fascinations of its own form. The

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118 'Pearls', pp.27-8.

119 Ricks, p.34.

final stanza of 'Impossibility' is explicit that staying in the underwater fertility of invention is a defiance of the perceived natural order; it is important that the 'I' of 'Impossibility' is carefully inexplicit as to its gender. At the end of the poem, there is a conscious and even celebratory turn as the poem – not the protagonist – examines how its own carefully extended form embodies its theme:

> As the sea circles this planet's
>
> Pictish spirals, Celtic solar discs,
>
> World-snake popping its tail in its own mouth,
>
> So I perfect my impossible, nuanced grit,
>
> Nacring its pregnant shell, its given/giving
>
> 360°.[120]

In the beautiful, created object which looks back at its creation, the poem allows both a male and a female voice. In 'Impossibility' there are fatherly eyes everywhere which 'radiate homely, incarnational light'; but like the fatherly eyes which undergo a sea-change into pearls in *The Tempest*, and are salvaged in another experiment with extended form in *The Waste Land*, these eyes are uncannily both 'homely [and] incarnational', and could be an oppressive presence.[121] Margaret Oliphant's attempt to reach a dead child by seance makes her 'strive against' the Father as a public presence in a religious hierarchy.[122] Her pearls articulate problems of form as a 'hard' technique, and of 'adamantine' fathers; but a poem growing up in a fatherly presence suggests that

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120 *SM*, p.55.

121 *SM*, p.43.

122 *SM*, p.53.

the hard problem of making a beautiful lyric, and the hard language with which it is examined, becomes investigated from inside the shell. The presences of 'Impossibility' are no longer lost in ancestral depths but understood from the experience of becoming a parent; a persistent affection, like the relationship between parent and child, still has to allow freedom. This is the framework in which the final sequence of poems in *Spirit Machines* is written, explicitly for Crawford's father. It contains the forms (poems in unrhymed couplets, prose poems with the flavour of translation, mixtures of technology with the primitive, the converse emptiness/depersonalisation of jargon) familiar from all the collections, but the final poem combines the scientific and linguistic pursuits recognisable in 'Pearls', and the formality of biblical elegy, with an elegiac intimacy of address to an understood father. The beauty of its completing cadence creates, like Oliphant's pearl, an enigmatic protection of a shared privacy:

> *En te oikia tou Patros mou monai pollai eisin:*
>
> In my Father's house are many mansions:
>
> If it were not so, I would have told you.[123]

Despite what seems to be Crawford, Herd, Robertson and Paterson's common interest in the form of poems, and in their experimentation and even absorption in the idea of a contemporary longer Scottish poem, the presence of and relations with parents and ancestors also seems to be a common point in all these poems. They all, broadly, suggest through an exploration of a longer form that relations between people are a constant and unresolved issue. There is also a constant and unresolved issue between

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123 'Alford' from 'Spirit Machines', *SM*, p.67.

the poems inhabited by readers and poets and the actual city or state that the poems represent; this is shown by the extent to which these longer poems both prolong the imagined, alternative states through an extended form, and register guilt at the way their formal experiment may be seen as a preoccupation with technique at the cost of more urgent problems in those cities or states. Yet it is in the combination of lyric treatment of narrative and the extended length of the poems where these problems are brought to light. The techniques and sounds of a reinvented verse form can beguile readers (and listeners), and Scottish writers working in prose as well as verse are prepared to exploit this as a means of compelling readers to reassess what is expected of a Scottish novel or a Scottish poem. Ellen Bryant Voigt's essay establishes how close narrative and lyric forms can seem, if readers are unused to the evidence of the ear, and this is particularly true of endings which turn the piece, whether the dominant form is prose or poetry. For example, this ending of a novel could, out of context, be the end of an extended poem – a confessional rhythm which stresses the workings of form, and orchestrates the line-endings into a halting and reluctant admission of parental separation:

> I didn't intend to mention it, but I love you.
>
> Of course.
>
> I do love you.
>
> And.
>
> You know now as well as I do how this works. You understand what happens here.
>
> This is where I'm in your hands completely.

Please, my darling, have need of me.[124]

A. L. Kennedy's plot dictates that the last page has been written by Nathan, a novelist who has taught his daughter how to be a novelist in her own right and uses this final turn of the page, as a device to acknowledge finally that he is her father. Of course, it also turns the reader about to finish the narrative, and the daughter about to be a novelist in her own right, into one another; and equally, the narrative has almost unnoticeably turned the tenacity of its various loves into a love affair between narrative and reader. Or in this narrative, a protagonist has unexpectedly fallen in love with another girl:

> just in a day, all your beliefs can be turned round, everything can change at the mercy of a girl who had pearl in ear an ice in hair an sudden Fionnula felt very happy, very excited at what life was going to lay before her. Isn't it amazing how some things turn round?[125]

Alan Warner, writing cross-gender, puts this suddenly statuesque piece of lyric towards the end of *The Sopranos*, a narrative which is often fast and a relentlessly modern Scottish novel. But this passage, signalling the end of the novel, depends on a lyrical use of cumulative language; it is carefully constructed with its seemingly accidental assonances (girl/pearl, ear/hair), its insistence on a turn in the plot echoed by 'turned around'/'turn round', its cavalier adoption of conventional spelling for spelling which will reflect the extravagantly aural symmetries of the passage ('péarl in éar an íce in háir an súdden'). This deliberate reiteration of the lyrical skill employed in making a passage

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124 A. L. Kennedy, *Everything You Need* (London: Cape, 1999), p.[567].

125 Alan Warner, *The Sopranos* (London: Cape, 1998), p.305.

which is beautiful in its own right is parallelled by Fionnula's gleeful extravagance in reusing the image of jewelled, privileged listening by revelling in the seductive sound and imagery of a previous narrative act (the other protagonist has told her a story about getting ice in her hair). It reinstates the importance of lyric in the emphasis on how realist consequence is suspended, redeemed by the sequence of actions and narrative 'things' turning round, in a lyric freedom from the rest of the novel's structure. In these two examples, there are subtle reworkings of what might be overworked issues of Scottish literature; perhaps not coincidentally, both novels are published by Jonathan Cape, on the fiction list maintained by Robin Robertson, who has clearly shown in his own poetry that oversimplified themes of Scottishness are ripe for formal re-examination. In A. L. Kennedy's novel, a female novelist achieves the recognition of a paternal society ('You know as well as I do'), but in a turn which begs the reader and the writer to reassess and maintain something of the paternal literary inheritance ('Please, my darling, have need of me'). In the passage from *The Sopranos*, Alan Warner argues that a male Scottish novelist can show two girls falling in love not necessarily as subject to male fantasy or voyeurism, but as an excited recognition of a changing attitude, pivotal for both novel and the nation it is set in; 'Isn't it amazing how some things turn round?'.[126]

Just as these longer Scottish poems experiment with fragments of prose or, like all contemporary free verse, have had to learn as Ellen Bryant Voigt argues to appreciate their relationship with narrative, so Scottish prose writing has been experimenting with how far it can borrow the techniques, and the implied problems, of lyric. The problem of trying to encapsulate personal turmoil, and a national multiplicity of knowledge and

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126 Warner, p.305.

political aspiration, needs the broader canvas of these longer poems, or even the novel to show the tenacity of the emotional and intellectual scope and the sometimes broken or imperfect ways in which it is deliberately represented. However, the debate of the longer Scottish poem always returns to the question of its own form, and to the ethical implications of necessarily becoming absorbed in conscious recognition of poetic form at the expense of emotion and authenticity of personal or national identity. In the next chapter I will discuss how the ideas of guilt and persistence also appear in shorter poems, and how Kathleen Jamie, W.N. Herbert and John Burnside have also struggled with form to achieve ways of examining the relation between personal and the civic in their poems. In their cases, the guilt involved with becoming absorbed in poetic expertise is eventually turned into a way of exploring physical terrain and describing community, and acts in John Burnside's poems as a compelling and elusive narrative in itself.

Chapter 5

Reality and the Dream State in the Poetry of Kathleen Jamie, W. N. Herbert and John Burnside

'Sentimental' is a lie. 'Nostalgia' is a lie – I'm interested in truth. But what's true?

Kathleen Jamie[1]

When W. N. Herbert's poem 'Letterbomb' detonates 'all the mirror-glass frontage of your mind', its purpose is to plant a more important incendiary device, timed to go off during some later reading. The poem argues upfront that contemporary Scottish poetry is seen as the natural successor to Anglo-Irish: it also explodes the myth that live Scottish culture is only sighted in Edinburgh during the Festival. But its real statement is that a poem's true inheritance is something like a delayed quarry blast of doubt, and that doubt is about likeness itself. In all the mirror-glass literary reflections, how can you tell the difference between what belongs in the world of making poems and what must defer to the real world outside, or the difference between the ideas in the poem and their real effects?

> There is nae real boamb, jist as the Scots
>
> waant nae real independence, there is anely
>
> the idea o a boamb, typical o that abstrack naishun

reasons the confused critic of Scottish nationalism, 'therefore / ma hurts are equally illusory', until his or her supposedly imaginary injuries put a real and bloody stop to the

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1 Interview with Kathleen Jamie, St Andrews, 21 & 22 September 2000.

abstract logic.[2]

The poems I will discuss in this chapter, like the poems in the previous chapter, are worried about making something beautiful and then measuring it against the real. They are public poems in that they refer to, or start to build, commonly recognisable public spaces, like Edinburgh, Dundee, Paris or Fife. However, they also strive to be public poems because, like Herbert's 'Letterbomb', they explicitly want to reach past the business of poetry or the literary marketplace, as well as past the ways of reading poetry which insist that marketplace and reception have no influence on how poems are written or read. In the previous chapter the comments from some of the poets on the relevance of being trained to read were critical of how their school acquaintance with poetry reading was entirely to prepare them for exams, for Higher English and for Practical Criticism papers. This exam-based training can seem to be " just about reducing poems to a set of features", as Tracey Herd objects, "when of course each poem is different".[3] Such a study of poetry at school, often in preparation for the Higher English exam, is how some of these poets remember their earliest training in consciously analysing and describing poems, quite different from their own private reading or writing of poetry. If they felt, and still feel, that this training was purely in order to satisfy the Higher English examiners, then it is no surprise that their earlier published poems show a tendency to strip from their work anything that might be the product of such a set of features, rather than of the original voice which they are developing. Few poets would care to write poems which are 'suitable', as a younger Kathleen Jamie protested; 'for the

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2 W. N. Herbert, 'Letterbomb', *The Laurelude* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1998), pp.136-137 (p.137).

3 Interview with Tracey Herd, Dundee, 19 June 2002.

geezers in kilts/suits, in the belief that's what poetry has to be'.[4]

What is unsettling, enchanting and the source of a lot of doubt is that they are learning their craft in public; the poetry of Kathleen Jamie, W. N. Herbert and John Burnside demonstrates some conscious revisions in style. Their poems, however, continually return to examine unexpected juxtapositions between what might be appropriate for a poetic register, and what might seem like a less mediated version of what is real; like the startling rawness of combining blood with the preconceptions of literary abstractions in 'Letterbomb', there is often a sense of rawness, and sometimes even an explicit stripping or flaying, in the poems that bring about collusion between public and private subjects. Where the poems discussed in the previous chapter are examples of a kind of form proposed as a reflection of national identity, the poems in this chapter are concerned with how form can be adopted to reflect both a communal and a private identity. However, this combination is not a simple matter of stating that the personal is the political. In these poems, particularly those written pre-devolution, it often seems as if an ideal communication between public and private can only be accompanied by a weird, dream-like and compelling sense of the unreal. There is power in the idea of, as Herbert's poem puts it, the ideas generated by an abstract nation. The similarity between what is real and unreal may seem a moral matter between truth and the possible falsehoods of artforms, but these poems, sometimes reluctantly, also need the unreal and the artistically-created to maintain visions of a personal faith in a future political state.

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[4] Kathleen Jamie interviewed by Richard Price in 1991, republished in Robert Crawford, Henry Hart, David Kinloch and Richard Price, eds, *Verse: Talking Verse* special issue (11.3 & 12.1), 1995, 99-102 (p.101).

Yet what may at first seem particularly artificial about the recognisable features of poetry, if perhaps a younger poet wants to challenge the 'men in kilts/suits' with their lists of poetic conformity, can later come to seem less alien, and less as if it is exclusively the possession of the teachers and examiners of the Higher English curriculum. Some of that artificiality, which seems to be heightened by textbooks and exam papers, can gradually come to be viewed as a rightful inheritance, and so initial rebellions against a particular kind of recognisably poetic approach have to be modified or reassessed. Kathleen Jamie and W. N. Herbert, for example, have since described in interviews their ambivalent personal reactions to the past, as I will discuss in this chapter, and their poems also illustrate how they want both to reject and to keep the legacies of personal and national history. Renegotiating a relationship with historical events, and with historical literary experiments, may not be a sign of a failed rebellion but of a maturing literary instinct which needs innovation and subtlety. In this chapter, I would suggest that it is also possible to see in contemporary Scottish poetry how poets are looking not just for originality in their own work, but for ways in which to offer new contexts for existing or forgotten literary and political discoveries.

Discussing their earlier poems means looking (necessarily briefly) at the morally-weighted concepts of originality and imitation, or reality and unreality, and it means discussing an associated sense of guilt. It also means looking at originality, imitation and guilt within the context of public space, because these poets are not only reaching out towards public social concerns but are learning in public. I will refer to two critical narratives which seem appropriate. The first is the sprawling urban dream state produced by Walter Benjamin's prolonged study of the Paris arcades; it is an

appropriately overwhelming work which appeared to hold its author spellbound at the peculiar conjunction of intimacy and public space, magical fantasy and commercial system, and it therefore seems an ideal reflection of both the professional careers and the literary preoccupations of all the poets I discuss in this thesis.[5] The other narrative is an essay by Jean Baudrillard,'Simulacra and Simulations', on the gradual merging in contemporary dream states of what was originally real with its copy; he argues that original and copy are now indistinguishable, so that one of the copies may mistakenly be credited with being the original source (he uses as an example the mutual dependence of Disneyland and Los Angeles).[6] The composition of these poems is haunted by the sort of quandary that Baudrillard describes as the contemporary anxiety about manufactured simulacra: once an effective, convincing simulation of the real can be produced, it can be treated as either a helpful interpretive fable of the real, or as a dangerous, seductive fake which eventually consumes its original and leaves only image. The poems I will discuss which will be particularly relevant to these public issues will be Kathleen Jamie's early poem sequence about her travels in India and Pakistan, W. N. Herbert's collection *Dundee Doldrums* which established the discovery of both his own voice and his relation to Dundee, and a selection of poems from John Burnside's collections in which he has discussed guilt, suspense and social duty rather than his more familiar territories of the domestic or the ecological.

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5 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). The work was begun in 1927 but was still incomplete when Benjamin died in 1940; the existing notes of his research were first published in their entirety in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1982), V1-2: *Das Passagen-werk.*

6 Jean Baudrillard, 'Simulacra and Simulations' in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Mark Poster (Cambridge: Polity Press/Blackwell, 1988), pp.166-184.

Where the poems discussed in the previous chapter often phrase themselves as a prolonged and considered struggle between equally charged elements of technical accomplishment, the poems I will discuss in this chapter initially seem to find their energy in a sometimes deliberately open, sometimes obliquely unintentional, rebellion against learning to accept the accomplishments of predecessors. Yet if there is a sense that these poets are writing a new version of Plath's 'Daddy' which records their struggles to be free of the family infighting of Scottish poetry, then its problem is inconclusive DNA testing. These poems often fight against some older and stifling authority, but discover that there is no simple object or predecessor clearly available to rebel against. As J. Derrick McClure argued recently, MacDiarmid's reputation as the sole initiator and figurehead of the Scottish Renaissance has been modified; although his presence is still, inevitably, perceived whenever Scottish poets open their dialectical mouths, his voice is really only one amongst a chorus of predecessors.[7] "Papa!" was W. N. Herbert's distinctly qualified response to the mention of MacDiarmid in an interview conducted in 1990, and I will discuss one of his MacDiarmid references later; in the same interview Herbert pointed towards Edwin Morgan as just one subsequent father-figure for Scottish poets, and in other collections he has presented an array of influential voices in his poems, from William McGonagall to William Wordsworth.[8] Kathleen Jamie's overtly temporal social observation is frequently accorded the extra dimension of being by a woman, as well as a Scottish, poet, since critical studies often group the work of female poets together; Dorothy McMillan's reading of 'Fountain', in a piece on Scottish women

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7 J. Derrick McClure, *Language, Poetry and Nationhood: Scots as a Poetic Language from 1878 to the Present* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2000).

8 'W. N. Herbert talking with Richard Price', in *Verse: Talking Verse* special issue, 92-102 (p. 97).

poets, identifies the poem as describing 'the tacky domesticity that still drags women down [...] transformed into the very source of female power'.[9] In a 1991 interview, Jamie's response to a question about how 'being a poet compromises other ways of living' reached out to a literary matriarch when she said that 'the problem is physical space. A room of one's own'.[10] Although the exchange in that interview was focused on the problems of writing other than internal lyric turmoil, it is inevitable that the boundaries between fighting for literal and metaphorical space are paper-thin, and that they should be interpreted as echoing earlier voices like Woolf as well as MacDiarmid.

The aurality of Jamie's earlier poems, particularly the striking sequence 'Karakoram Highway' in which the lyric voice is becoming characteristic of her later style, is dominated by a struggle to find a voice which can make poems out of the narrative of her journey across Pakistan, but which does not give in to the seductions of an easy simulation of clichéd poetical diction. In her most recent and pointedly transitional collection, *Jizzen* (1999), the emphasis moved from rebellion against established lyric technique to the ambivalent discovery of its fruition in her own work. Like the surprising fulfilment of old wives' tales, 'some arcane craft laid / like a tripwire or a snare, // lore, which, if I'd known, / would have dismissed as dupery', the early poetry of Jamie, Burnside and Herbert lays a frequently surreptitious foundation for the development of their later work.[11] It demonstrates, aurally, their explicit struggles with the sophistications of inherited literary legacies, and the doubt that returning to a

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9 Dorothy McMillan, 'Twentieth-Century Poetry II', in *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, ed. by Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan (Edinburgh: EUP, 1997), pp.548-578 (p.561).

10 Kathleen Jamie interviewed by Richard Price, p.101.

11 'The Barrel Annunciation', *Jizzen* (London: Picador, 1999), p.9.

childhood voice will enable them to create an equivalent sophistication. Tracing the development depends on their clear emphases on listening, both to childhood voices and to the aural effects of their experiments with form, as the early poems try at first to escape from the restrictions of the 'arcane craft'. Their early poems in particular resort to a prose narrative voice for a punch of the realistic, but prose is now another ambivalently-viewed relative for contemporary Scottish poets. Yet in both prose and poetry, an acute aural precision can forge new sounds and allows the borrowing of technical devices which depend on aural appreciation, like the precise lyricism used by A. L. Kennedy or Alan Warner. These poets, talking about writing in Scots, inevitably discuss their childhood as a source of their poems and the retrieval of a very young voice which enables them to write in Scots – as Herbert wrote in his justification for returning to his memory of Dundonian Scots, 'my playground voice seemed very far away'.[12]

Robin Robertson's 'Camera Obscura' or Tracey Herd's 'No Hiding Place' also root their ideas of possibility in a reconstruction of the past – their own or somebody else's history, or childhood. The long poems are sequences that are actually asequential demonstrations of how the known can be manipulated into new possibilities; Robertson plays with the strict inversions of negative images and the supposed precision of lenses, Herd scrutinises make-believe surfaces and the impossibility of ever getting a clear look at what they conceal. In both cases, there are moments where the rhythms of what they write, despite references to re-examining previously completed sequences of events, give every impression of anticipation, of being weighted towards something which is not yet completed. Similarly, Kathleen Jamie and W. N. Herbert also deal in anticipation and,

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12 W. N. Herbert, 'Author's Note', *Dundee Doldrums: An Exorcism* (Edinburgh: Galliard, 1991), p.3.

sometimes, apprehension; their poems are equally aware of timing and of the moment in which they are written. Yet, particularly in earlier poems, they turn on a point in the present; rather than being a contemporary investigation which subjects the past to the hindsight available to the present, the poems are often explicitly balanced between past and present. As such, they are frequently sites of both the serving of an apprenticeship and a rebellion against the (sometimes literal) spectre of the past and its threat of nostalgia, whether that is nostalgia for personal history or poetic forms.

Kathleen Jamie's recent response to a question about deliberate formal patterning of poems was about the tension inherent in learning the art, which can equate 'cosy' poems with opening a 'box' of conventionally formal technique 'and climbing inside':

> for me, the whole business of writing, since I was a kid of fifteen, was about getting out of the box, you know, which is why I hate sonnets, because it's about getting back into the box and closing it.[13]

Her early poems in *Black Spiders* and in *The Way We Live* set a pattern of escaping from anything that seemed too like 'the box' associated with exam-driven formal requirements and with writing poems purely to please 'the geezers in kilts/suits'.[14]

The opening and closing poems of *Black Spiders* (1982) are full of the tensions of trying to step outside that sort of lyric box, often revealed in a minimal use of adjectives which amounts to apprehensive avoidance. A lover retreats to a convent in the title poem, and the way she leaves is described as indescribable; she inherits a

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13 Kathleen Jamie, 21 & 22 September 2000.

14 Kathleen Jamie interviewed by Richard Price, p.101.

restricted gaze ('She caught sight of him'), four adjectives (*empty*, *cleft*, *severed* and *bleached*) and a lesson in how to create terminally unsettling eroticism with only one further and flatly uncommunicative adjective ('She wanted them / to tickle; black spiders on her lips').[15] Adjectives are sparingly used, and powerful enough in monochrome – a palette that has stayed with Jamie, who still gets effects in other ways and is wary of highly-coloured descriptions. 'Permanent Cabaret' indulges in a few more adjectives but although they are literally more flashy in effect they are, like Estelle, suffering from the threat of being frozen to the highwire by a sudden self-consciousness: 'Half way across Estelle glitters like frost'.[16] Like Estelle, the poems seem to be partly about having to step out into the unknown, like a poet learning what can be achieved by performing 'out of the box' – 'Our highwire artiste, / knowing nothing of fear, will take / sparkling risks fifty feet high', 'The audience wonder: is it part of the show / this embarrassing wobbling, / this vain desperation to clutch?'.[17] That Estelle's well-meaning partner, Coco the Clown, is obliviously 'reading Jung' might just be a dissuasion from any over-serious psychoanalysis of the poem as Illustration of the Mind of a Developing Poet; yet the poems in *The Way We Live* (1987), the collection Jamie stepped into next, seem to illustrate a continuing struggle to find a balance for an increasing technical awareness which leaves the audience wondering how much of it is simply part of the show. Embarrassing wobbling it is not; but there is the sense that an intimate process of poetic learning is being turned inside-out for public observation, a sense which is shared by Jamie and Herbert in their recent collections, but which for Jamie's work is best

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15 'Black Spiders', *Black Spiders* (Edinburgh: Salamander Press, 1982), p.9.

16 'Permanent Cabaret', *BS*, pp.28-29.

17 *BS*, pp.28-29.

understood in *The Way We Live*.

The collection was her first to be published by a sizeable poetry press (Bloodaxe). It followed five years after the publication of *Black Spiders* by a small press in Edinburgh, and contained some of the poems from that book; effectively, *The Way We Live* was her first collection to be produced by a publisher able to bring her work to the attention of a sizeable proportion of UK poetry readers. Since by the age of nineteen she had not only had her first collection published, but won a Gregory Award, the poems may in part have been responding unwittingly to the demands of fulfilling such exceptional early promise. They were also an opportunity to explore the many variations of her own voice, after the publication of *A Flame in Your Heart* (1986), a joint venture with the poet Andrew Greig which grew out of a script for radio; each of them had written alternate poems to create a two-handed play about a pair of lovers in war-time, essentially limiting them to writing a dramatic monologue for their respective characters, and Jamie felt that the exercise was ultimately not very satisfactory. *The Way We Live* was exploring her skills and stretching her limitations as a poet, without necessarily succumbing to an obvious formalism. A line in the opening poem of 'Clearances' encapsulates her two main preoccupations in the collection:

> This
>
> depopulated place! Where moorland birds
>
> repeat *a sound, like* copper, beaten [my italics].[18]

In the centre of the line, 'like' is one of those preoccupations. It occurs throughout at

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18 Kathleen Jamie, *The Way We Live* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1987), p.11.

descriptions of stasis, and is usually symptomatic of a slightly uneasy, sometimes dutiful, casting about for points of often literary comparison. The other preoccupation is to do with 'sound', because in this collection it is often attractive sounds which are found to be camouflaging stylistic traps; particularly Jamie's early lines are carefully, sometimes tortuously, twisted out of an equally uneasy relationship with a prosody which might otherwise become too smooth or unquestioned. As she still says, "the thing that's really important is sound [...] I've written some poems recently that sound so mellifluous that I want to jag it up a bit".[19] These two preoccupations do not always seem to be explicitly featured in the poems, but sometimes their reoccurring patterns seem unconsciously symptomatic of her concerns. For example, even 'beaten' might simply be a percussive emphasis, playing with the sound of striking a copper instrument, but the weak stress at the end of the line, 'béatĕn', is also a description of a wary rhythmic self-censorship, a repressively feminine ending; its interpretation is biased by the note of dejection possible in the sense of the word. Though the previous line has slipped into a perfectly even string of iambic pentameter, 'beaten' curtails and inverts the pattern, a deliberate misshaping which will emerge as a characteristic of the collection. This suspicion of the conventionally rounded form was hinted at in Kathleen Jamie's comment in 1986, the year before *The Way We Live* was published: 'I just don't know what a sonnet is, or a villanelle. And they don't interest me. But sometime I'll have to read into it, because I've got to know the craft'. The next question was 'What does it mean to be a Scottish poet?', which she parried with 'I suppose you're inevitably Scottish, like you're

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19 Kathleen Jamie, 21 & 22 September 2000.

inevitably female, but there are other things more essential'.[20] Perhaps what she saw as more essential at this stage was placing the emphasis not on 'Scottish' but on 'poet'; but rather than dutifully learning about sonnets or villanelles as if preparing for a practical criticism paper ('I'll have to read into it'), she was teaching herself about her own approach to writing poems.

The sequence of poems called 'Karakoram Highway' predates the publication of the long poems and sequences discussed in the previous chapter by some ten years or so, a reminder that Kathleen Jamie had a collection of poetry published before any of the first collections by Crawford, Herbert, Burnside, or Paterson appeared, and long before Robin Robertson and Tracey Herd's collections. However, the poems in Jamie's sequence are clearly experimenting with the kinds of aural distinctions which Ellen Bryant Voigt describes in the differences between free verse and narrative prose; in some ways, this is writing consciously drawing back from being verse, punctuated by the occasional incontrovertible prose comment, like the isolated final line of one of the sections:

> It must have been about then we first saw the mountains.[21]

The line stops the section dead in its lyrical tracks at the same time as it opens it up towards the new section and the whole new set of problems provided by the mountains. The line is as intractable as it can be about submitting to any reassuringly regular scansion, but the poem swings between the prose punch and the more verse-like

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20 Rebecca E. Wilson, 'Kathleen Jamie' in *Sleeping with Monsters: Conversations with Scottish and Irish Women Poets*, ed. by Gillean Somerville-Arjat and Rebecca E. Wilson (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1986), pp.91-99 (p.93-94).

21 'Karakoram Highway', *TWWL*, p.30.

patternings which are, in this anti-formalism, compass needles for the repeated circling of some problem:

> The mind can turn its own death in its hand,
>
> chat blythly about mountains, until
>
> the last moment, that appalling rise that ends
>
> in total unemotional blue.[22]

The tendency to a solipsistic lyricism, and the 'appalling rise' of rhythmic dependency, is often rather precariously countered with the stubborn prosaicness of the rhythmically ordinary. The path through these earlier poems is picked out with the stubborn care of an Edinburgh resident trying very hard *not* to walk in time to the inevitable sound of a piper busking on Princes Street. It evokes the problems, demonstrated in poems in the previous chapter, of what is entailed in making something very beautiful.

In fact, it is the deceptive ease of *likeness*, often the descriptions of likeness to an uncomfortably smooth literary symbol like the pearl, which seems to bother Jamie's poems most, particularly in this sequence; it is the word 'like' which signals the disturbance. The section continues:

> First sight of the summits, distant
>
> and almost transparent, like glass.
>
> Call it distance, not menace. White, not frightening.[23]

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22 *TWWL*, p.31.

23 *TWWL*, p.31.

'"What will I own" says the princess' in an early version of one of Jamie's slightly later, assumed voices as she 'surveys her perfect world / soothed in winter like a pearl'; what she owns is a legacy of ceremonial responsibility and carefully crafted luxury, but her question is about what she *will* own, what freedom she anticipates once she has thoroughly broken that symmetrical form. Although Jamie's work often appears with small revisions in later publication, the image of pearls seemed to necessitate some very careful rethinking on her part; the poem was finally published with alterations so that, perhaps, the pearl image ran no danger of appearing to be in its whole form as attractive as the act of breaking it.[24] 'Pearl', a poem published in *New Scottish Writing* (1996) but not included in *Jizzen*, went much further to invert the pearl/princess motif; an overweight and reclusive woman, swung into public view by the firemen who are rescuing her, is either sustained by her awareness of her own grotesque beauty ('Perhaps I began / like a pearl, unwanted / dirt soothing itself / on the sofa', 'Empress of flesh', 'I filled rooms, as churches are replete / with God', 'cathedral / in skin, pillars of fat'), or confined by it inside her house ('a goddess walled'). The sudden subjection of a private life helplessly craned into the focus of public debate is an example of the sort of startling public/private juxtapositions that, as Jamie says, 'jag up' the role of the poem as more than mellifluous or contemplative sounds; fittingly, it is opposition between rhythmic and irregular sound which expresses the clash of incomprehension in the poem. The woman's

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24 The version of 'The Princess breaks the sun/moon mirror' with the line 'soothed in winter like a pearl' was first printed in W. N. Herbert and Richard Price, eds, *The McAvantgarde: Edwin Morgan, Frank Kuppner, Tom Leonard, Kathleen Jamie: The Unpublished MacDiarmid* (Dundee: Gairfish, 1992), p.70. The line was then omitted, and the two preceding lines slightly altered to form separate sentences, when the poem was published in Kathleen Jamie and Sean Mayne Smith, *The Autonomous Region: Poems and Photographs from Tibet* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1993), p.27. (A version of the line was included in *The Autonomous Region*, p.30, which reads: 'But I loved it best when snow came, the distant world / would soothe its troubled self into a pearl'.)

neighbours are shocked when on her removal from the restraining walls of the house she is revealed as '*out of control*', but they instantly apply similarly ambivalent strictures of social and formal censure in rhythm and endrhyme. A repetitive pattern of stresses make their reported speech seem as if it instantly conforms to a communally restrictive cast of mind, and it is directly contrasted in typographic style and rhythm with the excluded woman's shape of speech, as distinctive in this setting as the shape of her body: *'óut ŏf cŏntról,| lét hĕrsĕlf gó,| póor ców,| dón't stáre*| / thĕir thín péasănt whíspĕrs / ríse tŏ mĕ lĭke práyĕr'.[25] Where it is easy to recognise a fixed rhythm in the italicised speech, the rhythm of the woman's response to her neighbours' uniformity is less obvious to scan, and this suggests strongly that when Jamie wants to simulate the process of independent thought she will often return to making verbal rhythms which are irregular or subtle.

Carol Ann Duffy and Ali Smith, other writers popularly billed as Scottish literary exiles, have centred work around the deceptive patternings created by *like*; for example, Smith's novel *Like*, or Duffy's poem about a voice being enticed by possibility which is only audible in dispossession: 'for miles I have been saying / *What like is it* [...] I am homesick, free, in love / with the way my mother speaks'.[26] It may also be only coincidence that *like*, and techniques of comparison, bear such importance for Jamie, Herbert and Burnside, all having experienced long periods of travel or living outside Scotland and whose poems are often informed by that distance. However, *like* in these poems of Jamie's signals similarity and the numerous possible variations on similarity, like but not quite like, that are often laden with gender theory; the worlds of oblique

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25 'Pearl', *New Scottish Writing* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), pp.196-198.

26 Ali Smith, *Like* (London: Virago, 1997); Carol Ann Duffy, 'The Way My Mother Speaks', *The Other Country* (London: Anvil, 1990), p.54, anthologised in *Dream State,* pp.6-7.

possibility encountered within the 'girl/girl' notation of Jamie's 'Hand Relief'.[27] But in 'Karakoram Highway', the full complexity of *like*-ness finds its form as a visual impact which short-circuits references to more literary weightings. One of the most eye-catching poems deals with the fragility of bracing together the two worlds of immediate event and the way that event will be translated into a literary existence in a poem. The poem uses *like* as a warning beacon for the unreliability of literary exchange rates ahead:

> At the sharp end of the gorge;
> the bridge. Like a single written word
> on vast and rumpled parchment. Bridge.
> The statement of man in landscape.
>
> And how they guard it.
> Drifts of people in either bank
> like brackets, knowing it can crash
> to the river in a mangled scribble
> and be erased.
> They write it up again, single syllable
> of construction
> shouted over the canyon.[28]

'Like' itself is 'a single written word', as visually symbolic of the construction of a poem

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27 *The Queen of Sheba* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1994), p.14.

28 *TWWL*, p.29.

as 'bridge' is symbolic of the event that prompts the poem. All the similes here are consciously those of text, so that 'the statement of man in landscape' seems inevitably translated into the ephemeral terms of a 'mangled scribble' which can be 'erased'. To translate such an experience into the literary terms of a poem, she seems to argue apprehensively, is a foolhardy if courageous ambition. The recognised construction of simile, *like*, continues throughout the poem as a sign of unsatisfactory or dangerous treatment of experience for Jamie, the irresistible challenge of putting into literary terms an experience that might just be too large or too alien for the literary terms that are taught in school. Two poems later, steadied by the prose rhythms of 'It must have been about then we first saw the mountains', the sequence has returned to the problem of trying to translate experience into a literary structure. This time, it is specifically a problem of describing how the experience is unlike anything comprehensible in literary terms, but still without rendering the description incomprehensible.

We haven't slept.

Our thoughts are slow and wide.

The mind can turn its own death in its hand,

chat blythly about mountains, until

the last moment, that appalling rise that ends

in total unemotional blue.

First sight of the summits, distant

and almost transparent, like glass [...]

A slight

clash of terror, you lower your eyes.

The sun reflected from glass,

more fearsome than glass in itself [my italics].[29]

Simile obstructs the sightlines of writing the convincingly unliterary poem; it is the reflection, rather than an object 'in itself', which is distracting and which makes the observer 'lower your eyes'. This part of the poem seems concerned with the fragilities of both literary and literal colonialism, and the pressures of writing as she is expected to write, sounding as she is expected to sound; it is surely no coincidence that the object chosen is the fragile substance of glass. Beneath the *glass/like* structure there is an inbuilt, undeniably lyrical, defensive structure, a carefully poetic similarity of sound; the suspensions of *slept* and *slow*, *wide* and *mind, blythly, rise* and *eyes*, hidden within lines rather than being placed at obvious line ends. In one sense, what is 'more fearsome than glass in itself' is that the conceit, and the literary coloniser, see themselves reflected in the eyes of readers and subjects. The sequence is striking, and in the twin problems of lyric convention and the perception of the speaker/speaking voice it records a running battle in this collection between the truth and the rhetoric needed to speak the truth. Yet, like the later and more technically poised poem 'The Queen of Sheba', where the irrepressible fantasy woman rides roughshod 'across the fit-ba pitch / to the thin mirage / of the swings and chute', the fantastic, the possible and the unknown are both more desirable and ultimately become more real than the 'thin mirage' of the everyday.[30]

Likeness and sound are the two most important technical features of this collection, and are frequently intertwined. The dactyls in 'Karakoram Highway' are a

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29 *TWWL*, p.31.

30 'The Queen of Sheba', *QOS*, p.9.

formal key to the most seductive evidence of the battle against the colonial spirit of conventional lyricism. Two sections further on is another 'song of a note / from the clapped-out engine'. As the mountains are approached again from a different angle, the section begins to build an unmistakable rhythmic pattern. One way of hearing the rhythm of the section's conclusion might be:

|High state

ŏf | móvemĕnt, trácк | clímbĭng tŏ | méet ŭs

ăpp|éarĭng, *lĭke* | éverўthĭng | élse ăt ă | dístănce

tŏ | blénd ĭntŏ | héat, tŏ | shímmĕr *lĭke* | mércŭrў.

Thĕ | shímmĕr ŏf | jóy ŏn thĕ | fáce ŏf ŭn|cértăintў.|[31][my italics]

'The shimmer of joy', as is emphasised by the debatable stress of 'úncertainty' or 'uncértainty', is increasingly uncertain because it can only be likened to other chimerical illusions, 'like everything else at a distance', 'like mercury'; but the main reason that 'uncertainty' has a threatening connotation here is, perhaps, simply because it is enjoyable. The final line suggests such an easily nostalgic rhythmic pattern that it is begging to be upset, readerly ears quite possibly aware of canonical milestones like 'Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me' with its deliberately increasing rhythmic faltering.[32] But here the sequence begins to uncover another sort of ease; that identity, particularly that of a woman, is magically fluid and compares naturally, perhaps too easily, with flowing water. In between the following sections' moments of unmediated clarity and real access to the dream state ('The palm of a crystal-gazer's hand

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31 *TWWL*, p.35.

32 'The Voice', *Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy* (London: Macmillan, 1928), pp.325-6.

/ night lifts away, things become defined: / this is our world for a time'), the easy rippling keeps coming back. It has the effect of complicating what should be a simple statement of identity with the awareness of playing another role as observer:

> Under the trees they're strapping up baggages,
>
> untying goats. Light |fills *like* ă |cúp
>
> sŏ wĕ | pick úp ŏur | pácks ănd thĕ | rhýth˘m ŏf | wálk.
>
> Keep walking while the world remains sharp
>
> as rock grasped intently,
>
> as the percussion of | bóots ŏn thĕ | trácк.
>
> Whīle thĕ | rívĕr's thrŏugh|óut *like* ă | sénse ŏf mў|sélf [...]
>
> ănd wĕ | sléep bў thĕ | trácк, whĭch cŏn|tínŭes,
>
> with the | sóund ŏf thĕ | rívĕr ăll | níght.[33] [my italics]

Only the line 'Keep walking while the world remains sharp' completely evades this ease; and it is the pervasiveness of the flowing sound of the river that makes the final section of the sequence so troubling. It is initially simply disquieting, in that it is an awakening in an observer's voice which is often either sexless or, rather, with sexuality underplayed; the speaker has been drawn into admitting a sexuality and, more obviously, into admitting that the sexuality is observed, seen, challenged, just as capable of seduction as the lyric

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33 *TWWL*, p.36.

ear has proved itself. Suddenly, the poet is as 'inevitably female' as her colonially haunted conscience is 'inevitably Scottish'. And suddenly the sequence's embryonic solutions to its claustrophobic identities are, like the body attached to its voice, shown as the subject of scrutiny as well as eroticisation – a scrutiny which does not necessarily please the body's owner. It is another realisation that immediacy and coming close to a subject lessens the freedoms it seems to offer, rather than making it more completely different ('appearing, like everything else at a distance / [...] to shimmer like mercury'). Her carefully-constructed bridgings and fluid identities are, full-circle, subject to the restrictions of double meaning at the same time as they confront possibility:

> he faces up-river
>
> glances out the corner of slit green eyes.
>
> Holds open the bridge with his foot, his thigh
>
> starts to shudder. The strain, the
>
> sickening river. We come very close [...]
>
> He slips out his tongue,
>
> parts the two cables an inch more wide
>
> never lowers his eyes.
>
> (Memsahib, you thinking what I..?)[34]

The opening section's escape into fantasy, '|Whéels hăve ĕn|gáged, | scórched ŏn thĕ | rúnwăy / Sŏ ĭt's | góing tŏ bĕ | hót, ĭs ĭt? | Áll cŏmĭng | trúe', is, in retrospect,

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34 *TWWL*, p.38.

heavily weighted in both sense and scansion: the possible two-beat vacancy implied after 'engaged' is a prediction of where to find the maps to the interior.[35] Like the pearls and eyes in the collections of the previous chapter, the final line of the sequence might be using those brackets to stare down the unremitting scrutiny of the independent construction that the poem has become (recalling the literary conceit of the bridge built on the support of people 'like brackets'). The brackets might signal a blur between doubt over the encounter and doubt over whether the response, the new voice, has been correctly guessed and translated or simply ventriloquised by a writer's controlling imagination; the dactyls are still intermittently audible ('hĭs | thígh / stărts tŏ | shúddĕr', 'thĕ / sícknĭng | rívĕr'). The sequence is left narratively unresolved, though its formal patterning succumbs to an aural doubt about never permanently escaping the restrictions of inappropriately formal lyric convention; 'O why do you walk through the fields in gloves / | Míssĭng sŏ | múch ănd sŏ | múch?'.[36] Yet there is no alternative to accepting that the poems are only temporarily enchanted by escape into something like (but not too like) ordinary life – 'this is our world for a time'. '|Máybĕ Ĭ'm | drównĭng ănd | thís ĭs mў | lífe', a comment submerged in the tenth section, argues that the realities of this new life have their own overwhelming form.[37]

The final section of the sequence retrieves the writer of the poem as someone who has her own external form; yet, as is made clear by her examination of her poems' forms and rhythms, the recognition of her own form can also be the examination of a

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35 *TWWL*, p.25.

36 Frances Cornford, 'To a Fat Lady Seen From the Train: Triolet', *Poems* (Hampstead: Priory Press, [1910]), p.20.

37 *TWWL*, p.35.

vulnerable state. In 'Poem for a departing mountaineer', the second line is offered, bracketed, as a measure of the status of bodies:

> Regarding the skyline longingly
>
> (curved as a body, my own, I desire you).[38]

As Tracey Herd's poems investigate trying on and sloughing off different bodies and masks, *The Way We Live* also presents bodies as masks. Yet where Tracey Herd's poems observe her subjects as fluid identities that float their lipsticked or fleshy exteriors on or off at will, but rarely show their direct speech, these poems oddly describe what it feels like to discover that a mask gives not protection but an increased vulnerability. The classification of these poems primarily as the work of a woman, or the work of a mother, might restrict the writer, an inherent problem for Kathleen Jamie who is often regarded as the principal female Scottish poet of her generation. Assuming the disguise of 'woman in love' or 'poet' or 'mother', however expertly the disguises may be assumed, leaves something within the poem suddenly vulnerable, externalised, visibly embodied, and therefore subject to a control which is not that of the writer. Adopting the defensive position – that the female writer, when pinned down as muse rather than voice, can escape fixity by means of amniotic fluidity – just opens floodgates of speculation on the possible intentions of the writer ('Memsahib, you thinking what I..?'). 'Duet' begins, perhaps intentionally, with a slightly self-conscious concept:

> I am the music of the string duet
>
> in the Métro, and my circumstances,

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38 *TWWL*, p.13.

nowadays, are music too: travelling

the underground like women's scent, or happiness.[39]

The implication of playing one part of a string duet is that some of the orchestration is clearly predictable, but is disordered by the rogue 'like'; an experimentation with conventional symbols of love poems, and of feminine eroticism ('like women's scent, or happiness') which results in an ambivalent recognition of vulnerability:

Again and again I discover that I love you

as we navigate round Châtelet

and hear once more the music. It's found its way

through passages to where I least expect,

and when you kiss me, floods me.[40]

That the speaker is overwhelmed by a private emotion in the public context of the Métro is undeniable; but whether those 'passages' are to be read as routes through a private human body, a public architecture, or a literary text is left tantalisingly, and almost protectively, unconfirmed.

In *The Way We Live*, Jamie played out the initial struggle of a young voice and its battle with building, not simply accepting, a complete honesty of rhythm which represents neither a kind of false verbal humility, nor demotic for the sake of it. Yet the double notion of seeing windows as viewpoints on the workings of a poem's structure,

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39 *TWWL*, p.15.

40 *TWWL*, p.15.

and the relative opacity of glass, of taking stock of life in terms of rooms seen into, and looked from, with difficulty appear throughout *The Queen of Sheba* and in a few poems from *Jizzen* as well. The rooms built for living in from 'Things which never shall be' (*The Way We Live*) are returned to in 'Royal Family Doulton', 'The sea house', 'Rooms', 'A sealed room' (all from *The Queen of Sheba*), 'Ultrasound' sections (ii) and (iii), and 'The Courtyard' (*Jizzen*). 'Aunt Janet's Museum' is another poem from *The Way We Live* which is about taking journeys into the interiors of other lives, and questions being answered with an opacity which emphasises that the whole story is rarely visible at one go:

> Could we
>
> forget these ritual sounds, or alter their order?
>
> Scuffle of feet on the narrow stair,
>
> the alcove, the turn where
>
> pallid light faints through the glass of the doors [...]
>
> Sounds of inside step forward.[41]

these sounds could be a matter of personal or of communal 'ritual', and the conjunction between the two is revealed as 'Sounds of inside step forward'. The obscured lighting and entries/exits of the tenement building are picked up directly in 'Forget It', two collections later in *Jizzen*:

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41 *TWWL*, p.44.

We done the slums today!

I bawled from the glass

front door she'd long desired [...]

The black door

of the close wheezed

till you turned the third stair [...]

Nana

and me toiled past windows

smeared in blackout, condemned

empty stone.[42]

'Some history's better forgot' is the maternal response, proof that a glass front door does not necessarily mean unedited truths: the turn, and the window, are obviously not to be forgotten. The process of learning to express them – the effort made audible in words like 'bawled', 'wheezed', 'toiled' and (tellingly) 'desired' – is obviously not to be forgotten either. But although the slums may be worthy of being turned into a history lesson by a teacher, or a poet, the teacher or poet is being reminded that the material they use is too intensely personal for those who have lived through it to remember it with any comfort. Again, it seems important to Jamie to reveal the raw collision between two worlds, which she argues is vital in turning experience into a poem. Losing that rawness would risk nostalgia, perhaps a more damaging kind of nostalgia than the obedient adoption of 'mellifluous' and conventional formal rhythms in her poetry.

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42 'Forget It', *Jizzen*, pp.5-7 (p.5).

From the notion of the interior or the room as something which, if only we could see it, would provide an unmediated and unquestionable demonstration of a private state of mind, Jamie's visible-room images gradually branch into poems in which the image holds relevance for a wider state of mind than one person; it becomes a museum, with all the attendant ambivalence about the selection involved in its curation and tidying, as well as suspicion of why it is preserved. Her personal memory of a family-owned hotel provides a parallel source of ambivalence between preserving privacy and the illicit sense of revelation in opening somebody else's past to public view:

> And as kids we just loved it, loved it, I don't know how many rooms, possibly 50 rooms; kitchens, pantries, a disused ballroom, a parlour, secret stairways, rotting wings – you know, it was everything a child could hope for. And to open the door – and I can still remember the sound of this door opening – it was to enter into the past. It was everything that was secret and relishable about the past. I was allowed to run around it and explore and discover all sorts of secrets in the place. And it had a profound effect on my brother and sister and me ... Knick-knacks and wonderful things. I know it seems junk – my mum used to call it 'trog', 'place is full of trog' – but for a wee girl it was delicious and I think I still try for that sense of deliciousness. I can't bear it now, my room at home is absolutely minimalist, I can't bear *stuff*. But in my memory, I can still take myself through every one of these forty or fifty rooms in that place and just reimagine them. It was a museum.[43]

Both Kathleen Jamie and W. N. Herbert have in interviews described the mental reconstruction of real places. What Jamie calls 'deliciousness' describes a reason for

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43 Kathleen Jamie, 21 & 22 September 2000.

what can also be described as a nostalgia for a house or time that is gone. As she admits, "I have an ambivalent attitude towards the past; part of me's saying, aw, just take it away, and part of me thinks, take it all away but *save* this and this."[44] The idea of conserving or curating something from the past is problematic but irresistible for these poets, and Jamie's earlier poems are at the forefront of this interest. 'One day, I said / I'll have a calm house, a home / suitable for idols' says a voice in *The Queen of Sheba*, but the more the displays of objects in the poems become suitable for public access or public reading, the more the significance of the objects develops its own tongue: 'Arraheids' is a case in point, as its 'tongues o grannies' caution against interpreting objects of inheritance rather than accepting their curation by a previous generation.[45] 'The Ice Queen of Ararat' is even more ambivalent about who is speaking, curating, and interpreting; the purposely elusive speaker, the 'curator of my gallery', cannot 'read' the intentions of the mountaineers who approach her 'museum of birds' bones', and is obdurate in presenting an inscrutable territory: 'I say: go on. Test every move with a hard staff'.[46] The language of Jamie's earlier poems sometimes seems to be torn between forging a new way of expressing experience, which does not rely on the accepted poetic criteria used in the 'exam-driven' tests she remembers from schooling, and relishing the challenges which are somehow difficult to disengage from that view of poetry as involving a test of the writer's and reader's skill and rigour.

Jamie's poems seem particularly aware that apparently old-fashioned objects, like

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44 Kathleen Jamie, 21 & 22 September 2000.

45 'Royal Family Doulton', *QOS*, pp.18-19 (p.19); 'Arraheids', *QOS*, p.40.

46 *QOS*, p.61.

artefacts or even educational practices, can be given a new lease of life depending on their context. This new context can be provided by a museum or a display of some sort, or it can be provided by the context in which poems are read, and the value of the context in which objects and poems are read affects both observers of the Scotland in which she lives and the readers of her poems. She has often been the curator of the poem which deals in disparate objects, as she was in 'Mr and Mrs Scotland Are Dead', 'The Way We Live' and 'The Queen of Sheba'; these poems are themselves displayed by curators of anthologies, and 'The Way We Live', by the period of the New Generation promotion and the *Dream State* anthology, had become representative of her writing.[47] '[T]he way it fits, the way it is, the way it seems to be', with its secular echo of a doxology, inserts a sharply ironical blade into the voracious disparity of the poem, providing the only source of rhythmic regularity in a way that prevents the poem from becoming a well-intentioned green paper for the contents of a new Scotland. But she curates the best of them with an awareness that not only is selection an interpretation, but that in Bourdieu's comment, 'it classifies the classifier'.[48] For instance, in the curatorially-titled 'Child with pillar box and bin bags', a mother composes a picture of her child. The apparently inexplicable oddness of choosing to photograph him in the middle of prepositions places a certain weight on the language of her selection:

on the kerb in the shadowed corner,

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47 For example, by 1994 'The Way We Live' had appeared in *Poetry With an Edge,* ed. by Neil Astley (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1988); *Sleeping with Monsters* (Polygon, 1990); *The Faber Anthology of Twentieth-Century Scottish Poetry,* ed. by Douglas Dunn (London: Faber, 1992); *Sixty Women Poets,* ed. by Linda France (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1993); *The New Poetry,* ed. by Michael Hulse, David Kennedy and David Morley (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1994) and *Dream State,* ed. by Daniel O'Rourke (Polygon, 1994).

48 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste,* trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1984; first publ. Paris, 1979), p.6.

beside the post-box, under tenements, before
the bin-bags hot in the sun that shone
on them, on dogs, on people on the other side
the other side of the street to that she'd chosen
if she'd chosen or thought it possible to choose.[49]

The sheer weight of variety in the prepositions and in the pre-positioning, and the pointedness of the final lines, simply underline the necessity and the confidence ('if she'd chosen or thought it possible'), even imagination, needed to make such choices about position-taking. Although the rest of the poem has unequivocal adjectives, the positioning of this restricted figure is grimly anchored to reality by its prepositions; their quantity seem to indicate that she has no opportunity to describe, and therefore alter, the state she is in. It results in a methodical sorting, the sort of specificity that Jamie's poems thrive on, particularly when poems raise an eyebrow at allowing a national event to overturn the classifications made in a domestic intimacy simply for the sake of it. Even curating a stamp collection shows Jamie as a Scottish child putting notions of Great Britain in their place, so that politicisation is only what is seen by a retrospective adult eye: 'after homework I'd have time / to turn to 'Great Britain'/ like I'd been shown [...] / Press. 'Bedtime!' *There*.'[50] She presents, as perhaps is common to Scottish poets drawn together by being Scottish, a definition of devolving nationhood as a constant process of personal selection being made under the public gaze.

The 1997 article which I have already mentioned in Chapter Four, on the idea of

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49 *QOS*, p.15.

50 'Song of Sunday', *Jizzen*, pp.31-32 (p.32).

Scottish devolution and the increasing sense of confidence with which Scottish poets were writing after 1979, is a relatively rare example of Kathleen Jamie's explicit comments on the influence of national politics on her own poetry. She began the article, written just after the 1997 referendum which agreed to Scottish devolution, by announcing that '[a] strange thing happened to me recently. I woke up one morning and discovered that half my poems were obsolete'. She went on to describe her difficulty in trying to define what she hoped devolution might stand for now that it was really about to happen, and explained that to be an overtly political writer – not a title with which she has ever wholeheartedly identified – was almost easier after the 1979 referendum than in 1997:

> It was a simple step, however, to become political during the Thatcher years when 'Scotland' was synonymous with 'resistance'. All it took was the discovery that we could write out of ourselves, our families and communities, in the languages we heard pressed, as I think Heaney said, on the inner ear. In so doing, we became Scottish, and 'Scottish' was a political word. More so than 'woman'.[51]

To what extent is that determined by some general desire to produce Scottish writers as evidence of politically demarcated success? The poems on display to the public, with all the reservations of imagery about glass, reliability of vision, and hubris of delicate structures, are perhaps too easily grasped as simply a general Scottish energy, and defining markers in a politically understandable resurgence. Writing about the problems of judging and noting literary prizes, Catherine Lockerbie turned to the positive element of these selections and their public literary hierarchies:

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51 Kathleen Jamie, 'Dream State', *Poetry Review*, 87.4 (Winter 1997), 35-37 (p.35).

> What matters (apart from much-needed loot to overdrawn authors) is the concentrated attention focused on books of real worth. In Scotland, we may be helped to build a map: a literary radar of where our writers are, what they react to, how the patterns of energy are forming [...]
>
> Scotland stands at a political cusp, a historical watershed. It might be legitimate to expect biographies, histories, long essays of self-examination. Instead, our writers respond not with treatises, manifestos and theses, but with works of the inner imagination.[52]

One sort of genre – biography, history and 'long essays of self-examination' – might provide uncomplicated truth, but it is the exposure of 'inner imagination', not wearying 'self-examination', which meets a public need; this extract from Catherine Lockerbie's article also shows and assumes changing definitions of literary 'worth' which acknowledge marketplace pressure as directly related to creative space ('much-needed loot' and a room of one's own have a large part to play in helping to map 'inner imagination'). It transports readers one remove from such an uncomplicated truth, but it does not necessarily make it an *un*truth.

Baudrillard's assertion in 'Simulacra and Simulations' is that worrying about what is true, and its relevance to public or consensual understanding, has been superseded in the public imagination. At some point, unspecified, we moved beyond questions of truth and imitation, or simple reflection of an object:

> Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the

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52 Catherine Lockerbie, 'It's a knock-out contest', *The Scotsman*, 7 November 1998, p.17.

> generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory – *precession of simulacra* – it is the map that engenders the territory.[53]

His vision of an existence which cannot distinguish between the real and the simile provides, in effect, a description of a written territory in which the simile has taken over as operating system and this is at least initially a source of justified unease. The alarm is caused by the lack of alarm, and a need to engender surprise. 'The real is produced from miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks and command models – and with these it can be reproduced an infinite number of times'.[54] The 'miniaturized units' of lyric technique, like *like*, produce their own sequences which are distinctively those of a poem, not prose; through their repetitions, they build rhythm or reveal symmetries of form in rhyme or metre. But though they are inevitably gestures outwards from the sequence of a poem to some apparent source of reference (*like* what? *like* where?), they are therefore inevitably gesturing towards their own consuming version of reality. Baudrillard presents this as one of two perceptions of how simulacra work, which translates in terms of Jamie's poems into the quandary of using techniques, amongst them simile, to produce and alter what's real. One perception is that 'the murderous capacity of images' set about consuming and superseding their own origin. Yet the other is the benign view that 'representations' can provide a way of understanding through imitation, 'as a visible and intelligible mediation of the real.'[55]

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53 Baudrillard, p.166.

54 Baudrillard, p.167.

55 Baudrillard, p.170.

The verbal and visual quandary that is played out in Jamie's poems over *like* is tellingly illustrated by Baudrillard as the example of imitated sickness; someone can *feign* sickness, simply pretending to be ill, but someone who *simulates* sickness eventually convinces him or herself, starting to suffer from the symptoms they simulate, and 'cannot be treated objectively either as ill, or as not ill'.[56] If an observation of a child photographed beside bin bags is recorded in the invasive imitations of a photograph, which can be reproduced over and over again, and in a poem's repetitions ('on them, on dogs, on people on the other side / the other side of the street'), then the social ills that have caused the child's position are not real; they only exist within an artform, and therefore cannot be treated. But by observing the way the real child and its mother are devalued and given no choice in the real streets of a real city, the imitative camera and poem save the image, curating it and insisting on its value. In the unreal dream state, this devaluation and neglect can be cured. The unreal state of the poem revives a rigorous morality which, the poem argues, reality has lost; it is reality which is sick, but its imitation is its cure, not the source of its weakness. Recently, she described the 'threat' to what might be termed a private sort of belief, and to a tradition of public art:

> I think there are places we need to keep sacred, or resanctify, areas of our life and our existence that are under extreme threat. And it doesn't matter whether we are talking about a real and absolute truth or whether we're talking about a socially constructed idea but I think it is necessary to have that consciousness in some part of our heads and some part of our minds and it is, as I say, under threat.[57]

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56 Baudrillard, p.168.

57 Kathleen Jamie, 21 & 22 September 2000.

Kathleen Jamie's poems have moved from an early mistrust of only being 'like' the real world to a confidence in the vision that poetry can maintain. The Scotland that she imagined in her earlier poems, which seemed a poor substitute for actual improvement in the state itself, is really a private vision which will always seem to be second best to 'a real and absolute truth' of political, cultural or social reforms. If what matters is only 'real and absolute truth', then poems will always seems suspect in their artificial, unreal state, and their inability to be more than like an ideal will always make them seem inadequate. By acknowledging instead that what matters is maintaining a vision of an ideal state, and that 'it doesn't matter' that such a vision might only be an 'idea', then poetry is no longer being treated as if it should be able to transform art into legislation. 'I suppose you're inevitably Scottish, like you're inevitably female, but there are other things more essential', Jamie said in her twenties, clearly wanting to evade her interviewer's possible expectations that she should be representatively Scottish and female.[58] At an earlier stage of her development as a writer, then it might have seemed 'essential' that she should develop a poetic voice which was really her property, and not seen as being formed by her nation or her sex. Now, with her skill as a poet established, her writing is in some ways a much more public art, interested in the idea of a communal vision and no longer afraid of being vision rather than reality.

W. N. Herbert's *Dundee Doldrums: An Exorcism* is in part created from the past, using his childhood as one way to build vibrant mental version of a city which, when the poems were written in 1991, was ailing. For Baudrillard's Los Angeles, read Herbert's Dundee:

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58 *Sleeping With Monsters*, p.93-94.

> Enchanted Village, Magic Mountain, Marine World: Los Angeles is encircled by these 'imaginary stations' which feed reality, reality-energy, to a town whose mystery is precisely that it is nothing more than a network of endless, unreal circulation: a town of fabulous proportions, but without space or dimensions. As much as electrical and nuclear power stations, as much as film studios, this town, which is nothing more than an immense script and a perpetual motion picture, needs this old imaginary made up of childhood signals and faked phantasms for its sympathetic nervous system.[59]

The relation between Herbert's imaginary Dundee and real Dundee sounds like Baudrillard's vision of the relation between 'imaginary stations' and Los Angeles, but with one important difference. Baudrillard defines likeness as an ultimately debilitating sickness, with Los Angeles and its surrounding theme parks described as parasitically involved with one another and suffering from *like*-sickness which appears to be a frighteningly babyish ailment. Disneyland 'is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real', and is 'meant to be an infantile world [...] to conceal the fact that real childishness is everywhere'. But Herbert's unreal verson of a real city is, like Jamie's, a dreamed state which was stronger than the ailing reality he saw at the beginning of the 1990s.

W. N. Herbert was an undergraduate at Oxford, where he also wrote his D.Phil. thesis on MacDiarmid, and he now lives in the north-east of England. But his early poetry, like Jamie's, forms an experimental base for his later work. He comments that his early training in Practical Criticism at school, with an explicit concentration on 'form and content', made him feel that 'poems could be approached and their mysteries

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59 Baudrillard, pp.171-172.

unscrambled to some extent'; this sense of tackling the 'mysteries' of an intricate structure applies to both his approach to poetry and to the city he was writing about.[60] *Dundee Doldrums* is firmly situated in a dream-vision which, by a ferocious revisioning of the layers of memory attached to Dundee's streets and public places, extends and sharpens its common existence by retrieving an allegorical figure which represents the city's partial reawakening – its 'golem' as Herbert characterises it in the poems. That the subtitle of the collection is 'An Exorcism' and the opening of the first printed poem is 'Whaur ur yi Dundee? Whaur's yir Golem buriit?' suggests a driven, possessed sense of place, and initiates the hauntings that recur through this and subsequent collections. Its 'old imaginary made up of childhood signals and faked phantasms' is essential to an understanding of Dundee's fascination for Herbert. His note to the volume points towards reading the poems in the light of the Scottish poetry's continuing relationship with MacDiarmid and Herbert's own thesis work. Yet although MacDiarmid can be invoked critically as the cerebral bogeyman whenever a poet threatens to be serious about being linguistically clever in Scots ('no too cliver, / no *above yersel'*, as Jamie's reproving voices put it), he is in Herbert's case a friendlier presence.[61] The ghosts in his collections tend to be big, mad and faintly quixotic urban guerrillas; they demand big, mad and quixotically politicised figures to give them context.

The challenge Herbert took on in writing *Dundee Doldrums* was to connect an intensely intimate spirit of personal memories with the public space of a city's streets. In one sense, it is difficult to imagine a poetic project that could be more dedicated to

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60 W. N. Herbert, e-mail correspondence, 21 June 2002.

61 *QOS*, p.10.

exploring Scottish identity than wiring up the private lives of Dundee's individuals to a kind of national grid, explaining their lives in terms of the city's fortunes and misfortunes which are in themselves a barometer of Scottish success and failure in trading and manufacture. If the collection were simply a protest at the falling employment rates in the city, then Herbert as a rebellious young writer, home from university and looking for a way of stretching his creative muscles, would still have had a lot of work to do. Yet if the collection were written only in a spirit of political protest, it would not have achieved such subtlety and tenderness; it clearly displays a sense of what Herbert says he had learned through Practical Criticism to appreciate in poems, a sense of 'mystery' which could nonetheless be recognised as an approachable structure consisting of ordinary subjects. What he never seemed to forget in writing the whole collection is the sheer oddness of expressing the lives of individuals by means of evoking the streets and structures they walk through; it is this peculiar way of animating public structures which galvanises the almost supernatural qualities of the collection. Walter Benjamin's Parisian arcades exert a similar fascination with the inconsistency of inner belief and outer existence, creating a new social dimension out of their mutual incompatibility:

> Streets are the dwelling place of the collective. The collective is an eternally wakeful, eternally agitated being that – in the space between the building fronts – lives, experiences, understands, and invents as much as individuals do within the privacy of their own four walls [...] More than anywhere else, the street reveals itself in the arcade as the furnished and familiar interior of the masses.

It is this almost surreally cosy sense of the 'familiar interior' which Herbert brings to Dundee streets, shopping centres and even arcades. But out of the irritating insularities

of the bourgeoisie, who know 'but a single scene: the drawing room', Benjamin argues that the moving observer can, a little like Estelle on the high-wire, negotiate a very public and isolated path through layers of existing and sometimes conflicting public memory. Benjamin makes the point that the observer's role is associated with seeing what a young man would see:

> For the flâneur, a transformation takes place with respect to the street: it leads him through a vanished time. He strolls down the street: for him, every street is precipitous. It leads downwards [...] into a past that can be all the more profound because it is not his own, not private. Nevertheless, it always remains the past of a youth.[62]

Just as Kathleen Jamie's earlier poems express youthfulness, not only in the journeys and emotions they describe but in the manner in which she deals with formal demands and sometimes exhibits a rebellious anti-formalism, Herbert's *Dundee Doldrums* are primarily about discovering his city's past as the formation of his own young poetic voice. Just as Benjamin describes the flâneur's understanding of the past, the past Herbert uses is also 'all the more profound because it is not his own'; in writing a poem so explicitly about the needs and memories of an entire city, a truly public poem, he was discovering a way of writing which could make public his own concerns. He noted in the introduction to *Dundee Doldrums*, and again in a 1991 *Verse* interview when he described the poems as some of the first and most fluent that he had been able to write in Scots, that actually walking through the city was essential to his ability to listen. Only by this isolated progress through public spaces could he listen with accuracy to a private knowledge, working out how best to represent in his own poetry a modern urban Scots and a modern

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62 *The Arcades Project*, pp.878-9.

city:

> the poems were written by going to the places they describe, sitting down, and scribbling them out. As the week progressed, I found that my focus on sound was producing some odd effects [...] the sounds, some clearly Dundonian, some more inarticulate, were apparently coming from an internal source.[63]

The city of his aural imagination and the city of his youth are not exactly the same place but they are eerily similar.

The most outlandish element invoked in the *Dundee Doldrums* is perhaps that of the 'exhumed' Scots the poems are written in. The author's note about his creation of this hybrid language suggests that the language is in part a subtle epitaph for the history of Dundee; it serves as a memorial for elements of the city which have not survived but which are kept alive in the imagination. But in some senses, he has created a much younger language than simply the offspring of MacDiarmid. In one sense its youth lies in its urban nature, explained by Herbert as his east-coast and, more importantly, updated alternative to the Scots of either Robert Garioch or Tom Leonard. In another sense it is also a young language because, though it often speaks in the voices of his obviously influential reading, it returns most strongly, as he says in his note to the collection, to 'the fact I spoke urban Scots as a child'. The most telling sentence describes the tension of influences that could produce a new version of literary Scots:

> I had just completed my first degree at Oxford. *My playground voice seemed very far away.* But the poetry I was writing was a curious mixture of English, American(ish),

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63 'Author's Note', *DD*, p.3.

Scots English, and something not quite formed [my italics].[64]

The creation, and in the Doldrums a reconstruction, of a geographically specific dream state depends doubly on place and sound, and their common referent is childhood – though, despite the crowds of children in this sequence, childhood is rarely depicted as a purely innocent state to which language should aspire. But in the work of all the poets I discuss in these chapters, there are older voices apparent who represent the poets' educations in different languages and literary awareness. These older, educated voices may open up new prospects for the poet, and encourage or justify the poets' experimentation with the best way to explore persistent memories of a childhood voice, as W. N. Herbert has since explained that an interest in the techniques and principles of Kerouac as well as MacDiarmid allowed him to explore the childhood voices of the *Dundee Doldrums*. Yet these older voices may also remain in editorial doubt over the snags of returning to a distant childhood memory, or trying to explain its hold on the imagination, because a childhood memory is likely to entrap the poet in revisiting old ground and risking an undiscriminating and sentimental approach. In 'Northern Personism and the Invisible Dandy', a recent unpublished essay on the role of the poet in the city, Herbert argues that if the poet immerses him or herself in the everyday sounds and streets of a city, without passing judgement on the value of what happens on those streets, then he or she becomes a true flâneur (Herbert looks to Baudelaire, not Benjamin, for the idea of the flâneur); the life that is represented may not be exciting in itself, but the act of writing down that life with an almost self-sacrificing precision is an exciting artistic achievement, as the poet manages to disappear into the textual city he

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64 *DD*, p.3.

or she has created.[65] 'MacDiarmid's dictum from 'Gairmscoile', 'soond no' sense' was the principle by which I hoped to slip away into the depths of a city which seemed to me every bit as boring as [...] the thought patterns of McGonagall', he says. Herbert draws attention to a useful distinction of Baudelaire's between 'the selective, self-creating ego of the dandy', the poet reluctant to lose their reassuring grip on modernity and submerge him or herself completely in the past of the city, and 'the accepting, non-judgemental self of the flâneur'. Yet Herbert's essay finally, perhaps reluctantly, qualifies models of poetry which have been too eager to embrace everything the flâneur-poet observes in the city; something of the judgemental is necessary. While he admires a poet like Frank O'Hara, 'a voice that loves both what it sees and who it remembers, and can thus establish an equivalence between them', such an indiscriminately affectionate approach to the city poem does not, finally, measure up to the world that surrounds the poet. Herbert recalls that he could not justify a politically naive representation of Dundee as a unified city in the *Dundee Doldrums*, and argues that in the period when he was writing the poems, 'Scotland as a single identity seemed too abstract and grandiose'; similarly, he concludes now that such a non-judgemental examination of a city, one which compels civic unity by the sheer affection of the poem that 'loves [...] what it sees and who it remembers', is finally let down by its 'idealism and limited applicability', because 'a city is not an aggregate of people who love each other, nor can it be delineated by addressing a subculture of those who do indeed love each other'. The poets of Herbert's chosen examples may, as he points out, have seen that subculture as the circle of friends and peers who understood their work. But equally, when dealing with such a weighted

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65 All references are to the unpublished essay by W. N. Herbert, 'Northern Personism and the Invisible Dandy', made available to me by the author.

subject as poems which are about a particular place and culture, the 'subculture' can also be a small and faithful readership who approve of the poet's ideas or even of the nationality or place that the poet represents; if the poet were to write with such non-judgemental affection as Herbert describes here, for either a sympathetic subculture of friends or for a particular readership, he or she would risk a particularly coded kind of reminiscence which could also be described as nostalgia. For the poets I am discussing in these chapters, nostalgia in any shape or form – nostalgia for personal memory, for childhood, for some lost spirit of Scottishness – is anathema, and smacks both of an image of Scotland which they are trying to dispel, and of a loss of the all-important intellectual rigour in their own writing.

Simply, as Herbert suggests, by concentrating on an 'accepting and non-judgemental' absorption and written representation of everything that surrounds the flâneur-poet, it is possible that the poet is therefore not exercising editorial or emotional stringency, and instead is rewriting what is familiar in their own work simply because familiarity in their own language and subject has become reassuring in itself. Don Paterson said of returning to this kind of old ground that:

> The worst thing for me is feeling I'm writing the same poem twice, that's a big sin for me. It's like what I was saying about the working class poem, that's all I've got to say on the subject; if I returned to it I'd just be being ... sentimental [...] It's the cancer of poetry, sentimentality. It's being in love with your own sensitivity as opposed to actually feeling anything.[66]

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66 Interview with Don Paterson, 12 March 2000.

"Ask that question to Kathleen Jamie, she'll send you away with a flea in your ear," he added and, true enough, her description of sentimentality is scarcely less unforgiving:

> We can't bring ourselves to be fey, we can't bring ourselves to be sentimental – I sort of teeter on the edge sometimes and think, woah, I know where I'm going and it's not a place I want to be. No, it's ... it's a fine line, isn't it? It's too important. 'Sentimental' is a lie. 'Nostalgia' is a lie – I'm interested in truth.[67]

As Herbert concludes in his essay, the way in which any poet develops the correct linguistic and emotional vocabulary for creating their textual dream state, or textual city, is up to the individual; what is important to remember is that such a project must be undertaken wholeheartedly, but with the knowledge that their artistic project which is the creation of this alternative dream or textual city is not the city itself. To conflate the two is to confuse what is possible in words with what is happening in the streets the poet tries to record:

> [Such a vocabulary] should be but can never finally become the entire voice of the city, within which the voice of the individual poet can vanish and reappear as the individual poem requires. This community of words is bindable by the adhesive love Whitman preached in a way in which the community of individuals it represents is not. There is a sense in which both Whitman and O'Hara confused a poet's love of language with an individual's love of the users of that language. It's the poet's job to love as many words as possible, people can be admired in your spare time.

Still, such stern rejections of the sentimental as an unworkable or unacceptable

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[67] Kathleen Jamie, 21 & 22 September 2000.

form of a dream state, in the comments of poets like Paterson, Jamie and Herbert, might briefly seem wistful. The origins of Herbert's language are kept equally carefully at one remove ('apparently coming from an internal source'); language is represented as a golem, in that it is made by another agency but has an unsettling half-life of its own ('something not quite formed'). Childhood and definitions of barrenness or incomplete development recur throughout the Doldrums, covertly associated with the social function of a literary language. They occasionally have an air of not being entirely considered as technique, but through a large body of work the references build towards a tone of self-surprise; the language has developed an ability to surprise its user. The surprise is that, despite the dangers of being sentimental, language returns to childishness, treating childhood as its source of both innovation and sophistication. A private, personal, childhood language is precipitated into adult, public function, and exposed to public scrutiny regardless of whether, as a language, it has finished growing:

> Bairns o Dundee, aukwartfashunt; these hoosies in rows ur
>
> graves o herts.
>
> Nae alteraishun.
>
> Nae escape.[68]

The private has been, and throughout Herbert's collections to date, continues to be exploded into a public demonstration or display, with a more physical (even anatomical) revelation than simply a mantra of personal-political. 'Nae alteraishun. Nae escape': the built-in ease of translating from metaphor to literal is intractible in a way that

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68 '3rd Doldrum', *DD*, p.6

the actual language, in Herbert's hands, is not. His early point, as demonstrated in the Author's Note, is that any apparent obduracy in language is only created by the lapsed instinct for it, on the part of the colonised urban reader: 'the dictionary is simply that part of the language we would have understood innately, had Scots not become a subject tongue, persecuted into rural corners and forgotten'.[69] Under a logic which is dominated by connections of sound and aurality, Dundee's golem or public display of spirit is allowed to alter and at least attempt to escape. It provides a passing glimpse of artefacts from other literary cultures, with its grotesque combination of horror and powerlessness:

> Dundee, yi Gollum! Yi Prometheus!
> Whit yearns o commerce tore yir entrails oot,
> whit scrawny hoodies hing owre yi?
> Puir affwhite boady nivir i thi sun afore.[70]

Although the golem of the '2nd Doldrum' becomes an evasive figure of the underworld, it reappears as a debased common currency which describes language and the city's commercial prosperity as equal casualties.

The '10th Doldrum' is subtitled 'Arcades', with a note that 'the Arcades were market stands formerly found beneath the Caird Hall', and it epitomises this painfully public struggle between money, language and spirit. Unlike Kathleen Jamie's shopping arcades, where the shopper can happily alternate between past and present languages by 'thinking: now / *in Arcadia est* I'll besport myself', the spoken rituals and the arcade

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69 *DD*, p.4.

70 '10th Doldrum (Arcades)', *DD*, p.16.

fantasy state of Herbert's Dundee can't be reconstructed because they have fallen into verbal disuse.[71] The roar of Herbert's golem is stretching forgotten linguistic muscles, and fumbling towards the kind of speech Herbert feels the city might be able to remember if only it could talk:

> Gnaa, then; rent! These yir bowels, yir moniplies,
>
> these yir hollowit hallowit caverns –
>
> Arcades, Ark, et in Arcadia ego –
>
> ego, te morituri...ach![72]

The 'hallowit caverns' recall other moments in the Doldrums which seem to be the products of a dizzyingly literary knowledge; the possibility of salvation is briefly provided by the alterations and escapes worked on the word 'Arcades', with references which are simultaneously accessible and wildly disparate. The display of Dundee's inner soul, or of the dream state visions in which its surface and underworld can be seen both at the same time, relies on recollection; a reconstructing fantasy which is not a salvation in itself, but which needs to be a living and shared consensus, constructing communal passages for imagination and change. It comes, in the Doldrums, from an adult sophistication of knowledge, a training in the humanities which can pun explicitly between passages in Scots and Greek urban civilisations – '"Polis"-man as unit o thi Burg' – but particularly from knowledge acquired in and associated with childhood and

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71 'Fountain', *QOS*, p.17.

72 *DD*, p.16.

the remnants of Scottish educational tradition.[73]

In *The Democratic Intellect*, George Elder Davie quoted a description of the nineteenth-century teaching style of Dr Melvin of Aberdeen Grammar School, who habitually compared Latin and Scots poetry as if they were intellectual equals:

> Once or twice, he would delight us by the unexpected familiarity of an illustration of a passage in Horace by a parallel passage from Burns. The unexpected familiarity, I have called it; for, though his private friends knew how passionately fond he was of Burns, how he had his poems by heart and often on his lips, and was, moreover, learned in Scottish poetry and the old Scottish language generally, this was hardly known in the school and it startled us to hear our Rector suddenly quoting Scotch.[74]

Elder Davie, who argues this is an instance of 'almost English passion for dry detail [...] counterbalanced by an un-English readiness to wax publicly enthusiastic about the literary quality of the poetry read', also quotes a further passage which emphasises the domestic and architecturally enclosed role of the language:

> The Melvin that we came afterwards to know *in his own house and library* had many tastes and interest of an intellectual kind that one could hardly have surmised in the Melvin of the Grammar School [my italics].[75]

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73 The note to the poem reads, even more explicitly: 'Creeley on *Maximus*: "*Polis* [...] is never more than the aggregate of people who have so joined themselves together, and it is as members define it. Their perception constitutes the city."' ('21st Doldrum', *DD*, p.28).

74 David Masson, *Memoirs of Two Cities*, quoted by George Elder Davie in *The Democratic Intellect: Scotland and Her Universities in the Nineteenth Century* (Edinburgh: EUP, 1961), pp.216-217. Robert Crawford notes that *The Democratic Intellect* was particularly important to him and to W. N. Herbert during their D.Phil. work in Oxford.

75 Davie, pp.216-217.

It would seem, after all, that it is not such an act of rebellion for Herbert to juxtapose the informal and 'unformed' voice of the playground with the snatches of English and Latin of the college library, and to relish that juxtaposition. As he explained in his introduction to his 1994 collection, *Forked Tongue*, he felt as if he really was speaking with a tongue split into two parts:

> One strand wriggles back to Blackness Primary and recites 'Yir heid's daft, / Yir belly's saft, / An yir bum is medd o leathir.' The other coils around Brasenose College and dreams of Marius the Epicurean. But I don't want to choose between them; I want both prongs of the fork.[76]

Like the pedagogic spirit of a Rector suddenly quoting Scotch, Herbert's development of his early poetry is that of a private language converted into a subversively public poetics. 'It was a simple step [...] to become political,' as Kathleen Jamie wrote of her own literary suffrage, when '[a]ll it took was the discovery that we could write out of ourselves'.[77]

Herbert's comments in an interview conducted in 1990 make a distinction between different sorts of Scottish *polis*, and imply that they create and retain different sorts of urban knowledge. He describes Dundee as an extraordinarily intimate city because its character is reliant on communally remembered public places:

> Dundee is lucky because it hasn't had the attention that Edinburgh had throughout history, and Glasgow has had in recent history. I think the kind of Scottishness which

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76 W. N. Herbert, *Forked Tongue* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1994), p.[10].

77 'Dream State', p.35.

> is now possible in Dundee is getting to be impossible in Glasgow. The number of people my father knows still amazes me. I cannot go into a pub with him without him acknowledging a vast number of people. One of the most interesting experiences of my teens was listening to my father and a close friend of his talking about their childhood, their working life, their service in the merchant navy, and I remember them constructing a street in Dundee. Simply going up a street in their minds and totally reconstructing it as they walked up it, going back to 1946, 47. I think that's quite magical. The way Dundee contains these layers.[78]

'Totally reconstructing' a city is seen as both effortlessly easy and strange ('quite magical'); 'layers' of the city exist purely in memory but are still a part of what makes the city capable of not only an intimate knowledge of its individuals, but also a particular 'kind of Scottishness'. *Dundee Doldrums* holds to account houses, pends, estates, mills, tenements and shopping streets, with their persistent half-life of ghostly inhabitants, for the shaping of the remains of a common imagination ('endliss ghoasties [...] that passt / yi by, aff tae ghoastie shoaps / whaur thi Overgate wiz').[79] The oxymoron of 'public house' is fully explored in that and subsequent collections; the intimate side of a communal existence is uncannily at home in a public space.

The groundwork of the *Dundee Doldrums*' dream-like quality, the unpredictable fusions of the private and domestic memory and the public arena, resurfaces in Herbert's most recent collection, *The Laurelude* (1998), but his insistence on precision seems to be lost in some critical readings. Contemporary literary Scottishness is frequently

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78 'W. N. Herbert talking with Richard Price', p. 97.

79 '17th Doldrum (A Childhood)', *DD*, p.28.

presented (paratextually) as richly unknowable, recognised intuitively. For example, Daniel O'Rourke explained that some poets from outside Scotland had been excluded from the *Dream State* anthology because not they but their poems simply 'didn't seem to be' Scottish; yet that kind of freedom can be misinterpreted, so that any obvious engagement with a formal precision of technique betrays, at best, a repetitious and, at worst, an undemocratic soul at work.[80] More recently, O'Rourke argued:

> The new Scotland needs special writing not special pleading. We've tried to avoid fertilizing the kailyard in either its old rural or new urban manifestations. Range and risk [...] Books that refuse to bang on about being, but that complexly and satisfyingly are, Scottish.[81]

It is hard to define the first expressions of this feeling that a complex and satisfying Scottishness is mutually exclusive of too much precision, too much cerebrally aware definition. It is an oddly intermediary definition, the sort of adjective-free wariness that aligns explicit technique with an explicit politics. Jeffrey Skoblow recently argued that the dream quality in *The Laurelude* resulted in just this kind of usefully imprecise definition of a national spatial imagination:

> [*The Laurelude*] conjures another sense of Scotland [...] that imagines itself a kind of utopian (nowhere) Scotland, a community not spatially or temporally defined – let alone geographically, or politically – more a condition than a nationality: an anti-nation. *In both poems the condition of Scotland is like a virus, which might inhabit any of us: a*

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80 Foreword, *Dream State*, p.[v].

81 Donny [Daniel] O'Rourke, 'Introduction'. *Unleashing 11:9: Untamed Voices* (Glasgow: 11:9, 2000), pp.[4-7], pp.[4-5]. The publication was a free sampler of fiction writing distributed in October 2000 to launch the 11:9 imprint.

sense of borderlessness, dislocation, and anxious pleasure are among its primary features.

> 'The Laurelude', like *The Prelude* (which haunts it), is concerned with the Growth of a Poet's Mind, and with the relationship between landscape and identity [...] the territory Herbert describes – the Beyond his poem inhabits and imagines – is a Scotland again not on any map [my italics].[82]

Like Baudrillard's simulacra, Skoblow's vision is of invasive sickness, but his interpretation has perhaps been deflected by Herbert's relatively well-known'Dingle Dell', which opens with the memorably inclusive manifesto, 'There is no passport to this country, / it exists as a quality of the language'. Crucially, although this poem's lines were used as the epigraph to the *Dream State* anthology of 1994, it is not a manifesto of either imprecision or an overwhelming mutability in language, but is instead firmly based in the viciously anatomical precisions of the Doldrums. It is the subjects who inhabit an idea of Scotland; the snag is that in Herbert's canon the idea of Scotland, an Arcades Project in itself, simply engulfs all attempts to circumscribe it by means of borders and passports, rather than merely discarding those definitions.

In 'Minimal Hymn to HON', a poem in Herbert's *The Testament of the Reverend Thomas Dick* (1994), undefined hordes visit the independent body of an anthropomorphic machine called HON; HON's body is communally constructed in the imagination and then both inhabited and given its independence by these unconsciously visionary

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82 Jeffrey Skoblow, 'Herbert's Laurel and Crawford's Burns: Postmodern Scotland' [conference paper abstract], *Scotland At Home and Abroad: Culture, Community, and Nation*, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, 11 March 2000.

onlookers.[83] Rather than possessing an innate and undefinable sense or taste for Scottishness, as Daniel O'Rourke defines the criterion for recognising Scottish poetry, each reader/practitioner of Herbert's Scots forms the innate quality that drives the new urban Scots machine. Yet what existed in the quality of the language for this 1991 collection was the threat of a non-choice; 'There is no passport to this country, / it exists as a quality of the language.' Then, 'it' was a ruinously precise pronoun, ambivalently representing both a passport and a country which exist nowhere but language; not freedom of imagination but, at that point in time, simply a disappointing unreality. Later readings of the poem are perhaps justified in picking out its opening couplet as signifying an optimistic freedom for 'this country', at least for the country's existence in its literary imagination. Like Kathleen Jamie's poems which visualise how things should be, the creation in Herbert's work of imaginative literary places provides a vital part of national reality, rather than a bookish escapism from it. Sean O'Brien argues that 'Herbert reads the protean, borderless, promiscuous character of language as a power'[84], but he quotes the opening of 'Dingle Dell' as a national poetry more exactingly anatomised to reveal the cut between 'a poetry of resistance, or chill exposure to the political elements' and 'the comic, celebratory and utopian modes' in which the poem belongs.[85] For all its oppositions, intimacies, internal wranglings and wealth of conflicting imageries, Herbert's corpus of work is comprehensively one of stripping precision and the huge task of comparing a city's worth of buried identities with external reflections and standards of

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83 'Minimal hymn to HON', *The Testament of the Reverend Thomas Dick* (Todmordern, Lancs: Arc, 1994), p.90.

84 Sean O'Brien, *The Deregulated Muse* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1998), p.268.

85 *The Deregulated Muse*, p.268.

reality.

John Burnside's poems are also concerned with checking reality against 'a *precession of simulacra*'.[86] His poems are pervaded by the sense that something has reached wherever you were going before you got there; something has preceded, and influences, what is commonly understood as reality. In 'An Operating System', that something has in addition started a whole chain of events, which are drawing to a close before any onlooker is aware of their initiation. This sense of self-containment is heightened by the whole poem's containment in one sentence.

> Like a room you discover by chance
> – one of those rooms in the basement
> where nobody goes,
>
> the closed air softly magnetic
> and off-sweet, like a summer of mint and privet,
> the locked machine singing away,
>
> maintaining the fabric, the life's work of apples and bees,
> absorbing the weight of the bonfires you find at dawn,
> the last charred pages of letters and magazines,
> the fall of leaves, the clutch of rabbit bones –

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86 Baudrillard, p.166.

there is another fastness in the mind

wide as a room, but tiny, and self-contained,

like the wren's egg you find in a smokebush, surprising and warm,

a thread of the fabric, and almost your only clue.[87]

The whole poem is a one-sentence simile, in subject and in form. It opens with a descriptive simile, a clear signal that it is only 'like' something else, not a perfect simulacrum. Its variation on the sonnet form (14 lines, but a group of six followed by a group of eight) is a reminder of a form which is recognisably 'wide as a room, but tiny, and self-contained', and is often used to reflect an extremely intimate, yet public, subject. Yet just at the point where the form might be expected to provide in its final couplet some neat summary or revelation of its subject, it turns instead towards a new simile ('*like* the wren's egg'). The simile does not even provide 'your only clue', but '*almost* your only clue'; 'like', in this poem, opens up space, even if that space is full of faintly sinister possibility. In combining the implication of the sonnet form, the idea of likeness as a kind of freedom or possibility, and an insistence on not 'I' but 'you', the poem argues that what is apparently an endlessly deferring poetic trick has actually created a space of common knowledge which is relevant to, and shared by, 'you'.

Burnside, Jamie and Herbert have all written political poems. They also write an entirely political poetry, as long as 'political' is not used in the sense David Kennedy crisply enumerated in a checklist of popular generalisations about British poetry, namely that 'Poetry is political' and therefore 'on the left', or in other words purely party

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87 'An Operating System', *The Myth of the Twin* (London: Cape, 1994), p.33.

politics.[88] *Political* in their poems is often a more inclusive yet a very precise term, and means *of the polis,* a reminder of what is often excluded from the narrower sense of the political. For Burnside and Jamie, if not as decisively for Herbert, the clues in poems lead to the shock of discovering an operating system which regards religion and poetry not as outdated museum objects, but as the means to maintaining a dream state, against which reality can be rigorously compared. The maturing of a distinct lyrical technique, and the right to use that technique in the description of a common state, can be described as the passage into true adulthood. Jamie's poem, 'Crossing the Loch', is about a short boat journey remembered as metaphor for maturity; the passengers are inexplicably surprised at the time, so that they are 'like [...] an astonished / small boat of saints'.[89] John Burnside's poems have been exploring the transcendence of the guilt associated with likeness and making poems since his first collection, *The Hoop* (1988).

Burnside was born in Fife in 1955, but was 'uprooted' to England when he was ten.[90] He had a Catholic schooling, an influence which frequently resurfaces in his poems, and after reading English and European studies at Cambridgeshire College of Technology, he worked in computing, returning to Scotland in 1995 to take up the post of Writer in Residence at the University of Dundee and become a full-time writer. His early influences include Catholicism and his poems describe a sometimes lonely alienation from the southern physical and mental landscapes in which he grew up. His writing includes novels, like *The Dumb House* (1997) and *The Mercy Boys* (1999), and a

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88 David Kennedy, *New Relations: The Refashioning of British Poetry 1980-1994* (Bridgend: Seren, 1996), p.248.

89 'Crossing the Loch', *Jizzen*, pp.1-2 (p.1).

90 Biographical note in *Dream State*, p.12.

collection of short stories called *Burning Elvis* (2000). The titles of the poetry collections also tend to make no secret of his interests; *The Hoop* was followed by *Common Knowledge* (1991), *Feast Days* (1992) for which he won the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize, *The Myth of the Twin* (1994), *Swimming in the Flood* (1995), *A Normal Skin* (1997) and *The Asylum Dance* (2000) which won the Whitbread Prize for poetry. Guilt is often his apparent subject, particularly in earlier poems; in some, guilt is explicitly related to religion, but more often the sense of guilt or anxiety is not tied to any discernible source. 'Calibration' and 'litany', words which monitor the continuity of ritual with scientific precision, might characterise his work, as would words like 'anamnesis', with its double meaning as a ritual of recollection and its relevance for medical diagnosis when a patient recounts his own symptoms. However, the point of many of the poems, signalled by formal turns, is presented as inexplicable in the established terms of either science or religion; whatever is expressed is described with conviction and formal strengths, but what is being precisely described is not one definite object but the definite, impossible precision of its likeness to *someone* or *something* else. Burnside's poems are inverted fables, turning inside-out concepts of what is private and what a matter of public evidence. They also often use the terminology of guilt and its diagnosis as the cover story for the poem, but signal that the hidden subject is the external form of the lyric – the ethics of *likeness*.

Baudrillard's essay uses fable as an example of how likeness pervades social existence, by invoking Borges's description of an empire which has become indistinguishable from its map:

> it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would

> be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer those of the Empire, but our own. *The desert of the real itself.*[86]

From its first lines, 'The same life happens again: / a city of clocks and leaves / delivered through fog' to its last, 'a déjà-vu, / leading through street names and churchyards / from nothing to nothing', Burnside's poem 'Source Code' could be rephrasing Baudrillard's description of how the real is produced from 'miniaturized units, memory banks and command models'.[87] For example, there is a characteristic syntactical pattern in many of Burnside's earlier poems which consists of one sentence split into two cola; the first part of the sentence is usually a simple statement, and the second part is a brief cadence made up of three clauses. It is a distinctive syntactical unit which is Burnside's strong lyric accent, and its shape epitomises the tone of much of his verse, appearing at the end of his much-anthologised poem 'Dundee':

> and it seems as if a closeness in the mind
> had opened and flowered:
> the corners sudden and tender, the light immense,
> the one who stands here proven after all.[88]

Burnside's habitual landscapes are very much that of a border country, characteristically timeless, or no-man's-land times like Sunday afternoons, dusk in autumn or winter. Interiors are often inaccessible, glimpsed through other people's

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86 Baudrillard, p.166.

87 Baudrillard, p.167.

88 'Dundee', *TMT*, p.36.

windows, while outside angels and ghosts are likely to be encountered in public spaces or ordinary exteriors like gardens. Burnside's poems are often voiced from the point of view of a detached figure walking through the layers of domesticity. Domesticity in turn makes up a vision of the city, a vision which conveys the same transition and disorientation whether routed through streets in a city or rooms in a house. Burnside's poetry is often reviewed in terms of its tranquillity, but his poems are often haunted by a sense that human attempts to calculate guilt end in unexpected results. The poems may end with a sense of 'an indisputable moment of living grace', but not necessarily as the predictable reward of being guilt-free. This dream-like state is not a guarantee of pleasant dreams; in the basement rooms of which Burnside is fond, we are reminded that a dream state is space for experiment and discovery, but not necessarily a safe space.

Poems like 'Dundee' and 'Source Code' have been anthologised as examples of Burnside country, but the poems in his collections are full of subtle variations and echoes of one another.[89] The biographical note to the selection in Sean O'Brien's anthology *The Firebox* ('Source Code' and 'The Old Gods') describes Burnside as having 'written prolifically from a sense of the vestigially miraculous', citing Geoffrey Hill as 'an informing but not deafening presence', which suggests that the poems are written in a style which evokes religious language and litany.[90] The more absorbing his formal inversions are allowed to become, however, the poems seem to be constantly moving

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89 'Dundee', published in Burnside's collection *The Myth of the Twin* (1994), appeared in a selection with "Silence is possible", 'Anamnesis' and 'Source Code' in *Dream State* (1994); with 'The Old Gods' in *The Firebox: Poetry in Britain and Ireland after 1945*, ed. by Sean O'Brien (London: Picador, 1998); and with 'Source Code' and 'Autobiography' in *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*, ed. by Robert Crawford and Mick Imlah (London: Penguin, 2000).

90 *The Firebox*, p.423.

closer to something, often towards the laden significance of rhetoric which Hill also invokes. Yet when the labourers of Hill's *Mercian Hymns* trudge into lamplight, they combine in fabular terms 'the re-entry of transcendence into this sublunary world' of a revisited artistic form with a firm reminder of the circumstances of its production.[91] In all Burnside's collections, the sense of the miraculous is still not so much vestigial as similarly emergent, or re-emergent, and similarly tangible.

Yet a terrain of likeness and nothingness, of dream territory, is not the same as an empty space or a non-existent territory. In a *Verse* interview of 1991, the year *Common Knowledge* was published, Burnside's discussion with W. N. Herbert was dominated by discussion of contexts for writing and for reading others' work. Their primary context is dream states and 'mythological country'. Herbert commented that Burnside's imaginary or dream-geographies are 'a real Scottish theme, because in Scotland historical fiction is a kind of literary unit of the dispossessed; you recreate your country, you create an independent space for your country in fiction'. In response, Burnside asked:

> did you ever draw a map of the country in your dreams? Because I had a long period where it was actually an identifiable place which I'd never encountered in the outside world. And I actually ended up drawing a map with a river down the middle of it, and it was like two sides of a track. with this wonderfully rural, beautiful landscape with a town in the middle of it. This town actually had a bit of the river running through it, and it was like an old German or Dutch university town. And across the other side of the river there was a place – and I called it the Snakelands at the time – I used to walk

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91 Geoffrey Hill, ' *Opus Anglicanum* ' (Mercian Hymns: XXIII), reprinted in *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1985), p.127.

through this in the dream, frequently, looking for somebody, a child I thought.[92]

In some respects this provides such a perfect and attractive critical map for reading his poems, and bears such a similarity to the maps hinted at by Herbert's and Jamie's poems, that it is almost too convenient; it contains the suggestion of a religious allegory ('the Snakelands'), the hints of a lonely childhood which tempt biographical reading, discussions of dream states. Like work by some of the other writers discussed, Burnside's collections have been recurrently motivated by the description of an elusive presence who is variously a child's friend, father, a brother, sister, or twin. This presence is further complicated by being the close relative in whom the speaker can see himself or even the speaker's mirrored reflection of himself which disquietingly holds the likeness of some other close relative. Yet this passage from the interview almost translates his work, steering the intensely complicated formal questions raised into an equivalent discussion of subject, in the way that *The Hoop* perhaps translates a Platonic search for the missing half of a hoop into an English vernacular of religious imagery. The vernacular for the reader could more often provide an alternative to the religious themes in suggesting that they serve as an allegory for the more contemporary secularism of analysis – revealing a subconscious or internal division and betrayal. Or the vernacular could be seen as the symbolic words which are turned into a vocabulary that can juxtapose words like *ice*, *bone*, *snow*, *wool*, *hedges*, *milk*, *windows*, *kitchen* and *light*, with *the dead*, *ghost* and – most noticeably in such a combination, perhaps – *angel*. Burnside uses 'angel' more times than many would dare – the insistence that angels are part of an everyday vocabulary and are a commonplace source of comfort is in itself a

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92 'John Burnside interviewed by W. N. Herbert', reprinted in *Verse: Talking Verse*, 41-49 (pp.41-42).

political statement, an assertion about the fabric of the *polis* and what it properly maintains. The revived cartography of the poems, like the resurrection involved in discussing the dead, ghosts or angels, is placed over what is perhaps more familiar contemporary critical territory with such exactness that the poems are often about describing the calibration of almost imperceptible differences; before and after the conjunction of dream map and pared-down ordinariness, and before and after the conjunction of expected discoveries in the judgement of a poem (likeness is suspect, reversion to traditional form is unchallenging or sentimental) with what it is like to experience a lack of expectation. In these poems this lack of expectation is expressed as the relief of absolution; but the process of constructing readings of the poems is likened to a public investigation and a public discovery of a form of poetic innocence.

In the previous chapter, I suggested that a poem that seems to display self-awareness of any clues which it might make to the reader is only responding to the ways in which poems are likely to be approached. Yet as I also suggested, the example of Don Paterson's statement in *Dream State* that 'too many poems these days anticipate the arguments they raise in the course of telling themselves' also argues against many of his earlier poems.[93] Pierre Macherey described the expectations that can be built into a poem, offering a similarly strong criticism of writing that, as if from its genesis, is constructed with a critical solution in view. He took as an example Poe's description of how 'The Raven' was constructed around its future exegesis, and examined Baudelaire's translation and commentary; like Baudrillard's fable of genesis, Macherey considered Poe's essay on 'The Philosophy of Composition' to be a similarly pre-emptive allegory

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93 *Dream State*, p.168.

rather than a genuine poem, 'a fantastic account of the work of the writer' which demonstrated how critical justifications and suspicions could invade the writer's process of composition when they set out with the intention of being readable.

> As Baudelaire correctly observes, the implacable judge has become a guilty cynic. He pleads premeditation: 'Throughout the entire composition there should not be allowed a single phrase which is not also an intention, nothing which does not contribute, directly or indirectly, to the premeditated design'.[94]

Through the 'confession' of the writer, the reader is under the illusion that he or she is being taken back to 'that initial reality which is the source and truth of all its remote and ulterior manifestations', and that they have gained freedom because they know the secret, or genesis, which motivates their reading: 'we no longer submit to the unfolding of the work, we participate in the systematic construction of its fiction'.[95] Macherey's chapter on these inversions of literary form goes on to contrast the writing and construction of a poem with the construction of suspense in a novel, which is essentially constructed around the withholding of the secret which will eventually unlock the whole narrative. But his account of the production of a poem also suggests that the point of genesis has to exist and should be treated as a guilty secret to be investigated by the reader – just that too much manipulation of poem into novel structures and too much elision of critic and poet will be cheating, and therefore increase the sense of guilt and the subsequent retribution.

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94 Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. by Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge, 1989; first publ. Paris. 1966), p.22.

95 Macherey, p.22.

Burnside's later poems do not submit to the formula that a sense of guilt must be substantiated by discovering a secret which is something to be guilty about. But his earlier poems, for example in *The Hoop*, seem to accept that this guilt over conscious uses of conventional form is justified. Similarly, the secrets of the poems are always to do with discovering that they have been conceived in guilty knowledge; yes, this is conveniently a reading that could talk about a Catholic sense of guilt, and, yes, the iconography and the vocabulary of a Catholic upbringing are evident. But many of the poems are purely about searching apprehensively for another half because, when the hidden or repressed alter ego is eventually revealed, it will complete the speaker but will prove to be guilty of all the crimes which Jekyll came to suspect of Hyde or Wringhim of Gil-Martin. In consequence, the speaker may have to admit in public his literary knowledge that the guilty brother is simply a fiction to disguise his own criminal nature.

As an example, 'Silence is possible' is an early poem, from *The Hoop*, and consists of fourteen lines, almost all of exactly ten syllables. It is almost too knowledgeable about the form it pursues, and that its own form is a simile for its subject, 'like a glove, the perfect fit'.

> Silence is possible, and after dark
> it almost happens: silence, like a glove,
> the perfect fit you always hoped to find.
> But somewhere close a child is whimpering;
> like the sound of a backstreet violin
> the wind is everywhere, repetitive
> and incomplete. Sirens are wailing

all over the city. New snow creaks

under leather. Silence is possible,

but you have been a listener for years

and what could you find but the hard quiet

of huddled swimmers in riverbed

or the casual hush of abattoirs

after the thud of a bullet nobody heard.[96]

This almost begs a reading, or maybe an obsessive listening, that is just too attentive. The seventh line prefaces the octave with an incomplete 9-syllable line, 'and incomplete. Sirens are wailing'. The repetitive cycles of unspecified guilt are perpetuated but not complete, making a pattern out of their own censorship. The sestet is introduced pre-emptively halfway through the last line of the octave, repeating the phrase 'silence is possible, *and*' as 'silence is possible, *but*' [my italics]. Alternatively, confining the eighth line to a discrete syntactical unit implicates the sonnet form in rule by martial law where 'under leather. Silence is possible'. Left to a desperate listener, the explicit sense of this early poem is that the narrative that will be supplied by the listener is about the discovery of crimes, a deferred resolution which will only be made possible by the discovery of a corpse ('Silence is possible / but you have been a listener for years / and what could you find but [...] the casual hush of abattoirs / after the thud of a bullet nobody heard'). With or without the hints at a mental police state, 'Silence is possible' contains the original premise of Burnside's earlier poems; the hand-in-glove complicity of form and its narrative justification fears the equation of formal completion with revelation. It gives

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96 John Burnside, "Silence is possible". *The Hoop* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1988), p.16.

away the conclusion (silence is possible but will only be nasty) in its beginning, so that the poem, like many of Burnside's, then acts as a suspension which relies on piecing together memory of the opening line; it is also starting with a private knowledge which is then reconstructed, scene-of-crime style, in often relentlessly communal environments, which threaten to force revelations out into the open.

Burnside is, of course, not alone in his ambivalence towards discovering the past as a potentially guilty secret, and towards revealing the formal techniques of reproducing reality as possessing Baudrillard's 'murderous capacity of images'. The provocatively-titled 'Anamnesis' is also from *The Hoop*, with an uncharacteristic use of a flamboyantly cinematic fiction, Harry Lime, taking the part of a treacherous memory: 'Memory, you should have known, is a double agent' the poem starts, in effect betraying its end through its narrative structure. It finishes with memory as a figure seen 'Up ahead [...] A figure you know from somewhere', overtaking the speaker's control in a chase through a municipal nightmare of sewers to end in a public discovery of betrayal, 'splashing and stumbling / into the flashlights and guns'.[97] There is a strong sense that the trusted brother or other half of the speaker may be out of the speaker's control; yet this poem is also a public admission of fault or guilt in the speaker's own memory. This emotion is in no way diminished or distanced by being staged in the body (or, as Herbert describes it, the 'entrails') of a city; it is magnified so that human emotions are weirdly larger than life, but these emotions are no easier or more predictable, and are no more likely to clarify guilt or responsibility.[98]

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97 'Anamnesis', *The Hoop*, p.62.

98 10th Doldrum (Arcades), *DD*, p.16.

Kathleen Jamie's 'Duet' combined the tiny betrayal of emotion that 'floods me' with the pervasive echoes of music through the Paris underground tunnels; the poem is structured around the transient nature of the emotion ('travelling the underground like women's scent, or happiness'), which moves into a cycle of repeated surprise at discovering vulnerability ('Again and again I discover that I love you') and resolves into the imagery of heartbeat against which the lesser reality of public transport is measured ('the platforms fill and empty: / a movement regular as your heart's beat').[99] Although it is not a dark poem in the way that 'Anamnesis' is, it also has a wistfulness and vulnerability about the evasiveness of happiness; moreover, the happiness is perpetually on loan, made visible only in the context of metaphor which circulates a personal experience through the vascular mechanism of an entire city. 'Whaur ur yi Dundee? Whaur's yir Golem buriit?' Herbert's detective of the city's past roars at first, before revealing the discoveries of the sequence as a permanent and public memorial 'oan thi stane / that's ilka Scottish hert'.[100] Nonetheless, Herbert's almost compulsive exhumations and revelations of his first collection also include in the 'Envoy' the revelation that the form and language he uses (the language which he describes himself as being the source of the sequence) are part of a conspiracy of silence which has been kept by the victims/cities themselves, having complicitly buried their own golem or voice: 'thi makar chusit this measure, this Muse, / because these are a subplot'. Later in the *Verse* interview from which I have already quoted, Herbert and Burnside discussed whether knowing where a work of art had come from, for example being aware of the politics of a film director, could be divorced from an appreciation of the art they had

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99 'Duet', *TWWL*, p.15

100 '2nd Doldrum (Elephants' Graveyard)', *DD*, p.5; 'Envoy', *DD*, p.30.

produced; Herbert modified an assertion that 'the actual act of reading' could be divorced from the 'threat' of contextual knowledge, saying:

> I prefer the routes by which I know something about this person, the routes by which that affects how I'm watching it to be secret, to be unknown to me. I like to have the information, but I don't want to know in what way it's affecting my viewing.[101]

The Laurelude, from its epigraph to its final lines, is as full of silent presences as the *Dundee Doldrums*. Although it is more voluble than Burnside's poems in its direct references to dream analysis and to film actors or, more precisely, to silent film legends, it is perhaps still reluctant to reveal everything about the routes by which its subconscious half is involved in the process of producing the poem. As Herbert asserted in the '21st Doldrum', detection is still simultaneously a pursuit of private guilt and yet a universal activity, so that a municipal conscience should simply be an enlarged reproduction of personal conscience; 'thi polis ur oor symbols', the poem argues, and punning on 'polis' meaning the Scots 'police' as well as the Greek *polis*, proposes '"Polis"-man as unit o thi Burg'.[102] Yet if each individual acts in the interests of the *polis*, then each individual may also always be inclined to police themselves and others; the poem complicates the suggestion of an untroubled community spirit.

There is, as Herbert argues vehemently in *Dundee Doldrums*, an ironic echo of a very classical literacy in revealing a private hurt as justification for the embodiment of authority to speak sincerely to and for the populace. Burnside's poems almost continually

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101 'John Burnside interviewed by W. N. Herbert', p.45.

102 '21st Doldrum', *DD*, p.28.

provide some expectation that, in revealing some personal vulnerability, the man in the *polis* (or the policeman) will reveal the cause of the guilt which pervades the whole civic structure. He does customarily reveal vulnerability, and it is usually preceded by a sense of guilt. Yet gradually the revelations have shifted, first inverting the narrative expectation by revealing the relief of innocence, then by revealing a lack of genuine revelation. 'Dundee' contains the habitual threat of too much closeness, but ends in the civic language of Scottish criminal law; 'the one who stands here proven after all'.[103] Like the end of Jamie's 'The Green Woman', the sense of completeness is expressed as a verdict of 'proven': 'as though we'd risen, / tied to a ducking stool, / gasping, weed-smeared, proven' but, like Jamie's women, proven to have committed innocence rather than the expected crime.[104] The verdict completes the poem, cutting short the prolonged suspense of being found 'not proven' – a verdict in Scottish law which does not allow for retrial but which more frequently means that the defendant permanently remains under suspicion. *Proven* is a word which also has meaning for the competent structuring of a poem, referring to a technical coming of age (no reason why that should affect only Scottish poets). But to be communally proven, establishing a right to be 'hard' to understand and to have the confidence to present difficult puzzles in the public arena of traditionally taxing lyrical forms, to handle poetic requirements like *like* without producing vulnerable, brittle lyric constructions, to establish a right to formal and philosophical difficulty, requires a communal examination of the clues in the ending. It requires a clear examination of attitudes towards lyric genesis and the ability to use things like *ice*, *bone*, *snow*, *wool*, *hedges*, *milk*, *windows*, *kitchen* and *light* in the company of

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103 'Dundee', *TMT*, p.36.

104 'The Green Woman', *Jizzen*, p.46.

the dead, ghost, and *angel* without anachronism. Perhaps one way is to infuse them with the tension of literary detection, leaving compelling clues to discovering the relevance these things have for a contemporary writer.

In one light, those clues seem to lead towards a carefully undenominational faith in something more than a procession of media-induced simulacra ('what's true?'), which can only be circumscribed as being *like* an operating system, *like* a private understanding of a common vision, *like* a lyric or a frequently mistrusted aspect of lyrical technique.[105] The notion of allegorical poetry as a disguise for a censored but commonly understood political message – where, perhaps, the importance of a woman in a poem would be that she is merely like an oppressed country – has been treated with justifiable suspicion. But as these voices have matured, they have decided to reexamine old conventions rather than simply rebel against them, and they try to flype these conventions inside-out. The resulting atmosphere of extraordinarily precise descriptions of reality, but somehow displayed in a slightly artificial product of fantasy, is contemporary Scottish poetry's dream state. Although becoming completely and explicitly at home in it means plunging back into a narrative of 'playground voices' and childhood, and thereby risking the horrors of sentimentality, its reward is a politicised vision which contains an allegory for the restoration of – for want of a less freighted term – a common soul. Kathleen Jamie described this rediscovery as both political and moral for Scottish poetry:

> We haven't wandered too far from the ideas which are difficult to express because they're so out of fashion now. all the true and the good and the sacred. And it takes an enormous amount of courage. much more courage than it takes to talk about being a

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105 'Crossing the Loch', *Jizzen*, pp.1-2 (p.1).

> woman poet or a Scottish poet, to say, I'd like to work my way back into some idea of what is true and sanctified, or sanctifiable.[106]

Solving these clues means stopping being frightened of what might be eventually revealed, or perhaps living with expressions of fear which do not necessarily result in the sorts of vulnerability that may be expected. And it also means facing communal, whether as generation or as national, approaches to artefacts – examining the routes by which we receive information about the historical or artistic object we are looking at.

When the Museum of Scotland reopened in 1998, the first exhibition in the newly-created Crafts Gallery was of basket-weaving. Kathleen Jamie, reviewing its various baskets and basket-inspired forms, suggested that 'just as film and photography have pushed visual artists into new arenas, so carrier-bags have released basket weavers to explore the dramatic potential of their medium'. She described the peculiar appropriateness of the forms, part organic and part very much human construction, to the 'high, conservatory-like museum hall' of the original museum building; she described their histories as evocations of work in farming and fishing communities, as 'autobiographical' constructions interwoven with tiny objects collected by the maker's daughter, as plain, traditional things to carry tatties or shopping in or, when they were made on a surreally huge scale, as 'beautifully worked space to curl up in'.

In all this description of context and artefact, Jamie's quotation from one of the exhibitor's statements reads as a pre-publication description of the transient spaces and ambivalently-collected objects of *Jizzen*:

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106 Kathleen Jamie, 21 & 22 September 2000.

> [Her] list of materials read like a shaman's store. One basket alone is composed of pine needles, wax, linen, cotton, twigs, leaves, feathers, and hair. There is, [she] says, 'an intrigue in making a coiled form, of enclosing, protecting, concentrating energies into a small space, concealing some things, offering others'.[107]

The poems of *Jizzen*, with their innumerable baskets, cases, buckets, bags, cradles, boxes, wombs, cars, boats and other transports, are as concerned with how lyric can become simply an abused artefact as are the poems in *The Way We Live*; they are still as concerned with phrasing questions about form. This is a typification of the problems faced by anthologists of Scottish poetry, as well as by its contemporary practitioners (often the same people). How much should lyric form be conserved, and treated as an 'enclosing, protecting' space, and how much should it be redesigned as a way of moving forward? And what objects of sentiment or form should be kept and incorporated in new poems and anthologies, and on what principles?

The principle of apparently random unsortedness, familiar from Jamie's earlier poems like 'The Way We Live', reappeared in *Jizzen*, although in the context of this latest collection one poem has an uneasy feel of dealing with constant subjects (chance, value, disparity, modernity containing the arcane) by means of the aural territory first staked out by her earlier collections. Opening 'Lucky Bag' reveals 'a gloup, a clachan, a Broxburn bing / a giro, a demo, Samye Ling'; it envisages the role of historicism and the contextualisation of artefacts when imaginary map and actual state are pressurised to complete each other.[108] The poem was commissioned for the hoardings which

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107 Kathleen Jamie, 'The Burden of Willow', *TLS*, 18 September 1998, p.25.

108 'Lucky Bag', *Jizzen*, p.42.

concealed the building site for the new wing of the National Museum of Scotland, and its contents are a purposely mixed bag of clues which allow glimpses of what might be included in the museum. Yet eventually, the hoardings round the realisation of the dream state have to come down, so that the emergent writing can be sorted, classified, or even mis-classified. Stepping out of the restrictions of being a 'new poet', or of writing in a contemporary culture which fears the threat of nostalgia and sentiment, can mean that the role of poet involves sorting out a highly tangled story of bequests and inheritances, taking an active part in the classification of the new artefacts that are being produced.

Conclusion

Museums and Anthologies: Reading the Dream Houses

> *'Just what is going on here?' – not on the page (for there nothing is 'going on'), but in the minds of us who read that page [...] And such scrutiny uncovers some who read too much from the page, as well as the many who read too little. But when is 'much'* too *much? To answer that we have to go outside literary criticism, to common sense.*
>
> *Donald Davie*[1]

> *The "colportage phenomenon of space" is the flâneur's basic experience [...] Thanks to this phenomenon, everything potentially taking place in this one single room is perceived simultaneously. The space winks at the flâneur: What do you think may have gone on here?*
>
> *Walter Benjamin*[2]

The poet's job description is changing, and so is the literary environment in which he or she works. In the previous chapters I have discussed some of the ways in which contemporary Scottish poets' poetry may be read and marketed; I have also suggested some of the ways in which their poems may be read as responding to expectations of Scottish literature and the marketplace, as well as a form of negotiation with their literary predecessors. In this chapter I will discuss how, through these poets' inspection of their ambivalent relationships with the past, the ideas of the museum and of the anthology reflect and consolidate new contexts for Scottish contemporary poems and their subjects. More and more the idea of the museum, as a model of collection, preservation and display, has revealed itself as an inventive resource rather than signalling a dearth of

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1 Donald Davie, Foreword, Purity of Diction in English Verse *and* Articulate Energy (London: Penguin, 1992), p.x.

2 Walter Benjamin, [M1a, 3], *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp.418-9.

ideas, and I will look briefly at some examples of what I describe as museum poems; these are poems that can adopt or satirise references to the organisation or cataloguing of a museum's display, and they therefore also question how we select and preserve symbols of national culture. I will discuss how the concept of the museum was used by Donald Davie in 1957 as a way of expressing concern about how new media have affected the process of writing. Against that more pessimistic view of the processes of selection and the effects of new media, I will set the much more recent attempt to classify the generation of Scottish writers under discussion as 'Informationists', a term which sought to describe the way in which these poets have welcomed the demands and influences of technological development and of new media which convey information.

Lastly, in my final pages, I will suggest an idea of Walter Benjamin's, the 'colportage phenomenon of space', as in fact being a more positive and more appropriate approach to how the past is used as a source of ideas for contemporary poets and their readers; most importantly, Benjamin's concept can allow for poet and reader to acknowledge the material aspect and changing contexts of individual poems and collections. Benjamin called public places which exhibited ideas and images 'the dream houses of the collective';[3] if 'museum' is a term which sounds too stultifying ("'Museum', Kathleen Jamie warns, "sounds like a collection of objects or ideas assembled for no good reason other than they are old"), then defining anthologies as 'dream houses' would perhaps suggest a more inspiring and appropriate context for the poems discussed in the previous chapters. The *Dream State* anthology is arguably the most symbolic assembly of this generation of poets' work, not least in some of the

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3 [L1, 1], *The Arcades Project*, p.404.

editorial emphases in Daniel O'Rourke's introduction.[4] I will therefore look at some of the editorial principles of the later twentieth century anthologies which had preceded *Dream State*, and at several of the millennial anthologies which followed it. Looking back at the poems I have discussed in the previous chapters, I think that despite the instigation of Scottish devolution in 1997 we can in one sense consider that the ideal for these poets, as perhaps for poets everywhere, continues to be a dreamed state. The temptingly cohesive groupings presented by anthologies including *Dream State* – and, in the case of Informationism, by some of the poets themselves – are not, in the end, the whole story, but what they have offered is an understanding of the many different languages and voices which are audible in the poetry of the *Dream State* generation of poets.

One of those languages could be said to be the voice of the marketplace, an awareness of what is expected of a contemporary Scottish poet and an acknowledgement (however uneasy) of the state of the literary and commercial worlds in which these poets live and work. This thesis has looked at the beginnings of a popular way of training people to read poetry, the Practical Criticism begun by I. A. Richards, and the way in which, due to professional pressures, Richards edited out some aspects of literary production which he found disturbing or confusing for himself as well as his students. In much later life, he remembered his puzzlement at how T. S. Eliot insisted on continuing his banking career when he could have come to join Richards and his colleagues in Cambridge; '[w]hat was he doing there under the pavement?' Richards had asked of Eliot's activities in a basement office in the City of London. He had discovered that Eliot

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[4] Interview with Kathleen Jamie, St Andrews, 21 & 22 September 2000.

was putting in order the papers and letters from a case involving inheritance, which meant 'setting in order [...] [a] multilingual correspondence of the utmost complication'; the commercial world Richards imagined for Eliot turned out to be '[n]ot the adding up of figures but a big, long headache of sorting out a highly tangled story'.[5] In Chapters 2 and 3, I have discussed how literary value is made up of several standards of value which, as Steven Connor points out, often cannot easily be persuaded into compatibility, and represent monetary values as well as judgements on textual worth – a genuinely tangled correspondence between literary and monetary value. In reading the poems in Chapters 4 and 5, I have suggested there is often an explicit warning made by these poets against oversimplification, either of ideas of nationalism or ideas of literary modernity; for example, when Robin Robertson's 'Camera Obscura' argues that wanting to follow 'a god, or rod of empire, an honourable madness' is a wistful but unrealistic desire to be part of a 'simple life', or when Kathleen Jamie or W. N. Herbert, as young poets, reassessed how the influences of childhood speech or of literary predecessors might be valuable in developing their own writing.[6] The museum poem and the anthology are ways of framing questions about the multilingual correspondences of contemporary Scottish poetry, and they concentrate on the complexity of competing values which the contemporary poet has to articulate, if not ever fully resolve.

It would be convenient to say that in contrast to the occasional earlier sense that all kinds of value are under siege, as in W. S. Graham's 'Implements in their Places', the

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5 I. A. Richards, 'On T.S.E.: Notes for a talk at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 29 June 1965' in *T.S.Eliot: The Man and His Work*, ed. by Allan Tate (London: Chatto, 1965), pp.7-15 (p.10).

6 Robin Robertson, *A Painted Field* (London: Picador, 1997), p.76.

generation of poets I have been discussing has simply embraced as opportunity what their predecessors have been inclined to see as crisis. But as I have suggested already, these poets consider that simplistic descriptions of their predecessors are unsatisfactory. These poets have demonstrated this variously in the complexities of longer poems, in a fierce criticism of the inaccuracies of nostalgia for glossing over the past, an ambivalent attitude to formal precedents, or in what I have described as the museum poem. As I will discuss later in this chapter, Andrew Roberts makes the point that it can be a tendency of anthologists to claim that the poems they have selected are in some way collectively overturning earlier misconceptions; it would be reductive to describe these poets as interested only in ousting the previous generation, or only in making their mark as a unified group. It is notable that the label which has been applied to some of these poets, 'Informationist', has been coined partly – though only partly – as a joke at the expense of critical desires to classify literature by school or movement.[7] The ambivalence with which these poets treat the ideas implied in museum poems illustrates how uneasily their work might sit in an uncomplicated critical grouping, because the museum poem in its various forms is usually a chance to explore how poets find themselves subversively attached to ideas or generational attitudes which they might prefer to discard.

The museum poem is a way of writing about something as if it were an artefact to be looked at in a museum display, and about the effects that perhaps such an often unexpectedly solemn or apparently impersonal view might have on artefact and observer. The premise of the poem can be explicit, literally describing museum displays, or it can

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7 For a record of the usage of this term, see Robert Crawford, 'Contemporary Poetry in Academia', in Andrew Michael Roberts and Jonathan Allison, eds, *Poetry, Value and Contemporary Culture* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2002), pp.85-100 (p.89, n.12).

be a more complexly presented set of questions to do with competing values and the ethics of preservation and selection. The curatorial language and title of Kathleen Jamie's 'Child with pillar box and bin bags' could define it as a museum poem, one which suggests that a description of a street scene can be shaped by the ways in which we give values to what we observe. In that poem, the way in which the language of visual composition is used, watching the mother position the child in unconscious contrast to 'people on the other side / the other side of the street to that she'd chosen / if she'd chosen or thought it possible to choose', suggests that for such social division not only to persist in a modern world, but to be unquestioned by its victims deserves anything but dispassionate observation.[8] The poem is a reminder that the street which still has two such disparate sides is called, emphatically, 'Caledonia Place', perhaps suggesting that there are similar positionings happening all over Scotland. In the context of 'Fountain', another of Jamie's poems in *The Queen of Sheba* which reminds us that our value judgements depend on the point in time when we make them, 'Child with pillar box and bin bags' acts as a shocking indictment on what is seen as the unbearably anachronistic elements of Scottish society which can continue to allow such deprivation; it is all the more shocking because of the savagely insistent use of the language of positioning, prepositioning and display, as if the child with binbags might be seen as no more than an image to be valued for its compositional qualities. It might therefore also be seen as a warning against treating a poem itself as no more than an image, to be rehung in different contexts. The divide between the two sides of the street, and between the cast of mind which can see only compositional features of the poem and the reader who might only

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8 *The Queen of Sheba* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1994), p.15.

sense the outrage which the poem skilfully encapsulates, are equally condemned, as is the idea of any museum which preserves outdated and unjust social values.

However, degrees of ambivalence creep into the museum poem, as is obvious from Robert Crawford's 'The Scottish National Cushion Survey'. Perhaps with a more farcical but kinder eye, the poem suggests that making a museum about anything, even '[s]ilk cushions, pin cushions, pulpit cushions', implies that the objects enshrined by the museum are welcomed into a kind of stultifying social convention and therefore made bland and impotent as symbols.[9] In the poem, that kind of defusing of an object by placing it in a context in which it is only examined as a curiosity actually triggers the kind of communal outrage that Jamie longs for as she looks at the anachronistic divides of Caledonia Place:

> We must preserve our inheritance.
> So the museums were built: The Palace of Cushions, the National
> Museum of Soft Seating [...]
>
> A chapter closed.
> And silently in Glasgow quick hands began
> Angrily making cushions.[10]

The outrage is not against the positioning or language of the museum, but it is critical of

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9 Robert Crawford, 'The Scottish National Cushion Survey', *A Scottish Assembly* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990), p.57.

10 *ASA*, p.57.

the way in which the museum's preservation of inheritance is presumed to be deadening, forcing regeneration to happen outside its walls. In relishing the jargon of an inappropriate way of thinking about artefacts, the poem exploits and explains a necessary tendency in what is described as Informationism to value and appreciate exactly what may be pompous or inappropriate about jargons. Without the alien appeal of the jargons of professions or the terminology of technological mysteries, the half-joke-half-aural-experiment that is described by W. N. Herbert and Robert Crawford as 'Informationism' could lose its edge, and in fact its entire reason for existence which is to play off the differing values represented by starkly differentiated patterns of language. Poems like 'The Scottish National Cushion Survey' are in a category of the museum poem which cannot help wondering if the museum's effect is necessarily a threat to change, or if it might indirectly achieve the change that the poems want.

The museum poem can therefore also be an expression of doubt that museums represent a restrictive order which should be overturned, and can begin to question whether museums might in fact be of use in preserving and displaying a range of different values. But the museum poem perhaps expresses the most intricate ambivalence about value judgements when, rather than seeing the museum process as an attempt to foist irrelevance on an urgent and present problem, it examines the artefacts which seem to have been on display for so long that they could be perceived as truly irrelevant to the modern poet. Contemporary Scottish poems which rework classical themes can also, in a looser sense, be called museum poems because while they usually preserve a kind of relic of earlier literature (often a myth, a translation of a particular version of myth), they inevitably do so with an eye to re-evaluating how that relic might be particularly relevant

to the present day. Such poems usually do more than rewrite the myth in modern idiom, but evoke its story and revalue its literary standing in the context of specifically Scottish concerns.

This can be seen in two poems by Robin Robertson and W. N. Herbert about the myth of Marsyas, which not only argue for the value of apparently anachronistic language, but which are bound up with the question of literary reputation and how it is revalued over time. Both poems evoke the myth of Marsyas, the half-animal, half-human figure punished by flaying for attempting to rival Apollo's established supremacy as a poet, the story's relevance that of the contemporary poets' own relationship to their literary predecessors. Both poems tackle the risk taken by each new generation to try redefining itself, as Marsyas does against Apollo, and as these two poems do against the cultural authority of earlier artists' interpretations of the original myth. Herbert's poem is titled 'After Titian's Flaying of Marsyas' and Robertson's 'The Flaying of Marsyas' is subtitled 'after Ovid', so that it is clear from the outset that for both poems the reputation of previous interpretations is as important as the original myth, if not more so.[11] Yet the original story is still important for one reason; by choosing to resurrect the flaying of Marsyas, Robertson and Herbert are both writing about the constant renewal of a classical symbol and, crucially, both choose to do so through a classical narrative which they emphasise is about the confrontation of predecessors and the stripping away of image.

If 'The Flaying of Marsyas' is read as a form of the museum poem, what is most

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11 W. N. Herbert, 'After Titian's "Flaying of Marsyas"', *The Testament of the Reverend Thomas Dick* (Todmordern: Arc, 1994), pp.55-56; Robin Robertson, 'The Flaying of Marsyas', *APF*, p.10-13.

interesting about it is Robertson's disruption of literary values; his account blurs who holds the upper hand in the story, questioning who is the predecessor and who is the interloper. Robertson's juxtaposition of a reaction to suffering with an almost equally intense pleasure in making an image of suffering echoes his explicit interest in 'Camera Obscura' in how the artist is torn between perfecting his art and perfecting human relationships, but in this poem the most important kind of relationship is shown to be between different registers of language and what they might represent. For example, punishment is delivered to the constantly silent Marsyas with the words, 'This'll learn you. Fleece the fucker'; although the myth dictates that it is Marsyas who is the upstart, and although the speakers are threatening on behalf of 'Lord Apollo', it is perfectly possible to read this poem as a case of a dominant style which is actually crude and uncomprehending, where the ruling figure is also described as 'the boy Apollo, raptor, vivisector'. Through their attentions, Marsyas becomes a martyred figure, 'flagged / as his own white cross'; but he also suffers as a silent martyr to the poem's narrative voice, which cannot decide how to present his image.

His image is subsequently presented three times, each rewritten in different way and linked by the word 'or', as firstly 'Red Marsyas', then as a grotesque 'muscle-man, / Mr Universe', and finally 'Or this: the shambles of Marsyas'. However, the debate over how classical poetic sources should be treated in the modern poetry museum is shown less in the silent exhibit of Marsyas's body than in the competing registers of speech, and the way in which Robertson's poem seems to refuse to sanction one above the others. When the aggressors' voices call Marsyas 'fucker', 'fucking bastard', 'cunt' and add smugly 'Can't even speak the language proper', they may seem clumsily unaware of their

own speech; but they are also a breath of life in what could otherwise be a very decorous poem, and in a collection where Robertson frequently seems to want to battle his own verbal tendency towards decorum. Is Robertson arguing that the dominant power in the poem comes from rhetorical elegance or from demotic force? Should one of the starkly contradictory registers of language in his version of the poem, or even Ovid's Latin original, be treated as 'the language proper', or is he arguing that the idea of propriety and precedence in poetic language is as mistreated as Marsyas's body, and indecisively grasped by authorial voices? Is the Latin source the equivalent of a muscular bullyboy which destroys any competitors for canonical recognition, or is Robertson arguing that such classical texts can be treated by Scottish poets as a fresh intellectual resource which is as immediate and sometimes as brutal as modern speech? The poem refuses to answer these questions, and simply finishes by returning to Marsyas's silent body. Robertson seems content to reveal, as he does in 'Camera Obscura', the difficulty in the poem rather than offering an unrealistically 'simple life' to the reader.

In comparison, the title of Herbert's 'After Titian's "Flaying of Marsyas"' suggests that literary artefacts like Ovid's poem are one sort of cultural object, on a par with paintings, and that each artist's use of myth is also a way of establishing his own mark on a common source. Herbert's poem, like Robertson's, also addresses Marsyas as a silent figure, valuing his worth as image as much as expressing compassion for his situation. The poem then follows the process of stripping away artistic representation to leave the scarcely tangible symbols of psychoanalytic inquiry ('You become the definition of untouchable, / a portion of ourselves that in ourselves / will not endure the

light caress of ego').[12] His poem engages explicitly with MacDiarmid's poem 'To A Friend and Fellow Poet', which with friendly repulsiveness described the process of writing a poem for public interpretation as an exhausting subordination of ego by poem, of being '"flyped" [flayed] into fame'.[13] Herbert's poem is linked with MacDiarmid's by connecting a 'map' that provides a sense of identity with a word ('flyped') which is shown as a suddenly Scots literary reference point in the middle of English lines: 'You are being exiled from your flesh; / that map that conjured Marsyas / is being flyped away'.[14] In one sense, Herbert is examining his own position as an inventive poet in modern Scots, and as a successor of MacDiarmid, more explicitly than he does in the *Dundee Doldrums*. He is also questioning whether the contemporary poem should make itself so much of its time that it should ignore all its forebears, and perhaps suggesting instead that being contemporary should involve acknowledging elements of these older cultural objects, whether MacDiarmid's poems or Ovid's.

In each poem, one word underlines how a literary antiquity, like the story of Marsyas, can be relevant to a contemporary Scottish poet. Herbert's word is *flype,* with its reference to MacDiarmid, whose influential presence for poets writing in Scots might still sometimes feel like 'the definition of untouchable, / a portion of ourselves'. Robertson translates 'flaying' into *fleece*, keeping an aural reminder of the persistently alliterative *f* and *fl* sounds which, like the 'forensic flash, flash of cameras', dominate

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12 *TRTD*, pp.55-56.

13 Hugh MacDiarmid, 'To a Friend and Fellow Poet', *Collected Poems* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1962), pp.429-430 (p.430).

14 *TRTD*, pp.55-56.

'Camera Obscura'.[15] *Fleece* is used in Robertson's poem for its double meaning of removing an animal's pelt, but also of duping or stripping an unsuspecting victim of everything valuable, as Robertson questions what kinds of language and what recollections of classical sources are truly of value to him as a modern poet. The words have their own significance within each writer's own collections, but they can also be read as a way of discussing how to value the literary resources and antecedents which might be treated as being just one of the poet's private gallery of cultural objects.

However, the role of the poet itself is put in doubt in these poems about literary artefacts, poems which mean that the contemporary poetry collection itself can be treated as the equivalent of a museum with all the responsibilities of evaluation, selection and preservation that the museum metaphor entails. Being a poet in such a situation is itself a position of ambivalence; in museum poems, it is not possible simply to employ the language of curation as a satire on detachment. As Robertson's poem suggests, it is often impossible, or undesirable, to argue that one sort of literary artefact, like a language or a narrative, should have precedence over another. The museum poem is most recognisably about the effects of displaying such literary objects in a kind of museum, but it can also gauge the unseen costs of excluding artefacts or people from sites of preservation. The resulting ambivalence about the role of the poet in contemporary culture is stated directly in a poem by W. N. Herbert about the construction of Newcastle's Baltic Arts Centre in a converted flour mill. Herbert describes looking at the site of the centre with a group of arts specialists, suspecting that turning a mill into an arts centre may be inappropriate to the city's needs. Seeing both

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15 *APF*, pp.[59]-93 (p.77).

the present state of the area expressed in graffiti and the past history of the site as vying for attention, his reaction is in terms of his own role in documenting what is happening and what it means for the society he works in as a poet:

> That could mean it's left to me to be
> unable to stop imagining that previous man,
> still in the bosun's chair, but stranded,
> swinging between the two remaining walls
> as though between the hulls of two ships [...]
>
> That sort of thing's my job.
> That and noting nobody but Lee Boy would
> record himself, whereas I could swear, mealie-
> mouth-parts audible to the small all
> which listens to that sort of [radio] station, that art
> can only satisfy a city's palate, and
> galleries are not the issue; something else
> is showing here that none of us will stomach.[16]

As Herbert's poem argues, taking the museum poem seriously also means taking seriously the place of the poet, which in this poem is precariously swinging between the two functions of the renovated building. The more serious tone of some museum poems often seems to come from the poets finding themselves being built *into* the site; they

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16 'Hard Hat Heaven', *Cabaret McGonagall* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1996), pp.121-123 (pp.122-123).

discover that they have been included within the problematised category of art or anthology, when perhaps it would be more comfortable to be standing outside. Yet for the contemporary poet it is very difficult to pretend not to be implicated in the business of writing poems, especially since making the claim (as Herbert does) that being a poet is actually 'my job' could also be seen in these poems as an exaggerated claim for the poet's talents, or more probably a complex issue of betraying family or social class.

The definition of what makes a museum poem can therefore be stretched to include poems which may not be explicitly about museums, but which nonetheless present themselves as exhibition sites of literary artefacts, formal objects which might at first seem anachronistic in the context of contemporary poetry. Either sort of museum poem usually demonstrates that the archaic has a disturbing ability to unbalance contemporary perception, each artefact liable to reveal the power of what Kathleen Jamie calls an 'arcane craft laid / like a tripwire or snare'; and, as her poem 'The Barrel Annunciation' further suggests, when poets are compelled to think about how the 'arcane' object is customarily treated, they are usually compelled to think about how they are implicated in that treatment, and what their proper response should be.[17] As the context of Jamie's other poetry shows, the arcane craft is not only cooperage, or even folklore, but a knowledge of formal issues which is essential for any poets trying to negotiate with their literary predecessors.

So, like Herbert's imaginary man in the bosun's chair, trying to direct the production of what might become a future exhibit, these poets are neither safely in nor

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17 'The Barrel Annunciation', *Jizzen* (London: Picador, 1999), p.9.

safely outside the museum walls. They might even begin to find that the museum environment has begun to authorise the poetry that is produced, and that although they might set out to write poems which expose the influences of a form of cultural selection, their work is nonetheless being gradually shaped by these processes. Section 40 of W. S. Graham's poem 'Implements in their Places', which seems to act as a commentary on how the examination and training of readers affects their relationship with poetry, is itself shaped and even constrained by the processes it intends to discuss, with its uncompleted lines reading 'YOU ..... / YOU .....'.[18] Like Herbert's sinister conclusion that 'something else / is showing here that none of us will stomach', this section of Graham's poem may suggest that the influences it examines actually force a crisis in the poem; we, or 'You', have to choose between elements in the poem, whether those elements represent different art-forms like art-centre versus graffiti, different registers of speech, or other 'implements' or artefacts to do with the historical processes of reading poems.[19]

As I will be discussing in the context of specific poetry anthologies of later twentieth-century Scottish poetry, the idea of competing values (often brought about by different languages, or new media) can be seen as crisis; latterly in Scottish poetry, however, it has been welcomed as opportunity, diversity or a challenge for poet and reader. The dates of some critical commentaries I have chosen to illustrate this development do suggest that there is a steady shift of opinion about competing values, moving from a discernable nervousness in the 1950s to an explosion of confidence in the

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18 W. S. Graham, 'Implements In Their Places' (section 40), *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1979), p.246.

19 *CM*, p.123.

1990s, and I think that this is broadly representative. However, it is not a case of dismissing earlier criticism in favour of a contemporary viewpoint. Just as I suggested at the beginning of this thesis that retracing Richards' steps in the 1920s would help to discuss contemporary Scottish poetry, I have also chosen Benjamin's observations of the 1920s and 1930s to suggest that the value of these contemporary poets' ideas is often complemented by discussions of value in a previous generation.

That said, Donald Davie's essay of 1957-8, 'The Poet in the Imaginary Museum treated the metaphor of the museum as an example of contemporary poetry in crisis, in that it typifies how the museum metaphor has been used in response to a particular kind of panic about the destabilisation of value in poems. Davie saw this destabilisation as brought about by an incursion of different media and marketplace valuing and promotion of poetry, and in this case the tone of impending disaster in his essay seems outdated. Inevitably, hindsight reveals its predictions of poetry in terminal crisis as a result of technology's devaluation seem as unfulfilled as much more recent predictions of the death of the book or the end of all print media.

In his essay, Davie chose the museum metaphor as a response to a crisis in value brought about by the involvement of mechanical processes of reproduction in art, and how they affected all artists but particularly poets. His particular complaint was that these new media – sound recordings, colour reproductions of paintings – meant that the poet had access to different eras and artistic styles, and that such effortless access meant that the poet inevitably was tempted to piece together hugely ambitious collage or pastiche-like works, rather than work towards true originality on a much smaller scale. He qualified the idea that modernism across the arts could be attributed to the

innovations of sound recording and colour photography, allowing the artist to build their own working library or museum of artefacts, styles and cultures as never before, by objecting that the equivalent revolution in literature was the printing press which had predated these newer technologies by more than four centuries, so that actually literature owed nothing to the explosion of technology in other fields.[20] As a result, although he pointed to MacDiarmid and Pound's efforts to create a language for poetry aware of the international resources available, he described the English poetry of the 1950s as properly retreating to the suburbs and margins, beginning to rebuild not a grand museum of internationally understood classicism but a 'house of English poetry'; this was, he argued, the only appropriate response for the poet challenged by 'too many mythologies to choose among and nothing [...] to tell him which of the innumerable galleries in the imaginary museum are those he should frequent'. Only by going to ground and writing what Davie, ambivalently, termed 'minor' poems could poets avoid using and even abusing the knowledge which he argued was an essential part of the museum made available by mechanical reproduction: the poet who attempted the 'major' poem in the modern age must inevitably build their work out of a series of delicate references to earlier styles, which Davie argued were 'parodies'. He finally separated poetry into 'major' and 'minor' achievement; by 'major', meaning a national rather than suburban approach but also an ambitious, even hubristic attempt to deal with the territory left behind by modernism.

Davie's approach has implications for the role of the anthologist. As he argues,

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20 Donald Davie, 'The Poet in the Imaginary Museum', in *The Poet in the Imaginary Museum: Essays of Two Decades*, ed. by Barry Alpert (Manchester: Carcanet, 1977), pp.45-56. First publ. in *The Listener*, LVIII, 1476 (11 July 1957), pp. 47-48 (part I) and LVIII, 1477 (18 July 1957), pp.92-93 (part II).

in a kind of prelapsarian state before 'the imaginary museum arose', in which he rather implausibly implies that there were no invasive media, there could be such a thing as poems which were 'complete in themselves, self-dependent, cut loose from the poet who wrote them'; the only way that a 'modern poem' can avoid this kind of contamination, he concluded, is by being 'provincial' in its ambition because it refuses to exploit the instantly accessible resources of international cultures. Yet the resources of other cultures are just what the *Dream State* generation, fully aware of how much they and their roles as poets are implicated in their poetry, have exploited for analyses of their own situation.

The particularly academically-influenced Scottish poets who are concerned with anthologising and the formal possibilities of the museum poem have, to an extent, anthologised themselves as a group both in the patterns of where they live and work and what they write, but also in the self-description of 'Informationists'. W. N. Herbert pointed out in the 1994 anthology of their work, *Contraflow on the Super Highway,* that the explicit labelling of Informationism is half a joke, its punchline activated by solemn critical endeavour; his ambivalence echoes the oblique defences and qualified authorial presences which are built into some of the poems I have mentioned, like Don Paterson's 'The Chartres of Gowrie' in which the authorial figure is removed. Informationism is the art of 'negotiating between jargons', between groups of unreal languages or languages specific to a particular period or function, 'taking pleasure' in the negotiating, and 'turning the pleasure to positive ends'. It sounds very like the art, which these poems also tend to demonstrate, of negotiating between different sorts of values, like Kathleen Jamie's poem 'Fountain' where figures glide through the peculiar classicism of a

shopping centre. Herbert, though, described the Informationists 'as a unit' as:

> Scottish, male and generally suffering from Post-Academic Trauma [...] so that means we have a particular heritage, and a particular agenda. Davidson, MacDiarmid, Morgan; writers who all establish that it is as important to know as it is to feel, and that it is vital to examine what we mean by, as well as what we feel about, knowledge.[21]

Such interest in the meaning of knowledge and the feelings it prompts is obvious in the coinciding emphasis in the work of the current generation of Scottish poets on making poems about knowledge; Don Paterson's sonnet '19:00: Auchterhouse' which revises the sonnet's function from love poem to knowledge poem, John Burnside's poems about almost remembering lost knowledge, or Robert Crawford's interest in the confluence of knowledge and intimacy, whether for a lover or a country, all argue that knowledge and how we receive it is central to these poets' work. Herbert's piece describes an Informationist as being Scottish, male and affected by academic research, though perhaps it is more accurate to describe Informationists as critically aware of the problems involved in defining Scottishness, masculinity and academic environments.

More importantly, I would argue that it has subsequently become clear that an 'Informationist' is potentially any Scottish poet of this generation who understands that no amount of new definitions can be proposed nor conviction communicated an audience unless the poet is willing to consider the form in which they communicate, and to acknowledge (or share the joke) that the forms they negotiate between are half the point of the writing. Equally complicit with writer and reader, the kind of independent gaze

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21 W. N. Herbert, 'A Defence of Noetry', *Contraflow on the Super Highway,* ed. by W. N. Herbert and Richard Price (London: Southfields Press / Gairfish, 1994), pp.xiii-xix (p.xv).

that troubled I. A. Richards (worried by his students who 'must by now hate me') is identified by Herbert as the inspirational 'plagiaristic eye' of MacDiarmid's poetry, the acknowledgement that the most important part of innovation in form is the creation of 'that little space in which we believe him enough to accept a new (and usually ridiculous) possibility'. It is exactly the ambivalence of the vision, one eye on sincerity and one on the opportunities of form, which Herbert argues give a poem 'authority', establishing a museum or resource of formal media for the Informationists, and which sees the poets 'feeling away with our "learned antennae" like Kafkaesque forkietaillies, reaching into a free space we did not know we possessed'.[22] Although Richard Price, and then Donny O'Rourke, defined the Informationist school as 'Robert Crawford, W. N. Herbert, David Kinloch, Peter McCarey, and Alan Riach', and Robert Crawford has included Don Paterson, Kathleen Jamie and John Burnside in the grouping, the Informationists, by definition, have a habit of evading permanent, unambiguous capture in schools and other academic spaces.[23] Herbert finishes the piece by turning a slightly plagiaristic eye of his own on the business of poetry manifestoes, by acknowledging that the Informationist manifesto is to undermine and destabilise any such limitation:

> So we're not 'really' Informationists, not all the time, not with manifestoes that we all have po-facedly signed [...] we don't know what we'll need to meet what's coming next,

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22 On Richards' letter which uses this phrase to describe his examination candidates, see Chapter 2; Herbert, 'A Defence of Noetry', p.xvii.

23 For example, see the section titled 'The informationists' by James McGonigal in Douglas Gifford, Sarah Dunnigan and Alan MacGillivray, eds, *Scottish Literature in English and Scots* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), pp.782-4. McGonigal cites Robert Crawford, W. N. Herbert, David Kinloch and Richard Price 'to exemplify key features of Informationist practice', but chooses not to suggest that there is a definitive list of 'Informationist' poets.

and must include, can't afford to exclude, any medium.[24]

The work of these contemporary Scottish poets negates Davie's argument that the poet surrounded by a museum of literary reference is weakened by having, as he protests, 'one foot inside the imaginary museum, and one foot out of it'. He uses the museum metaphor in a way which, even though it acknowledges the influence of media on poetry and on reading poetry, cannot be expanded to account comfortably for the full range of pressures displayed in the contemporary poems I have discussed, as is clear from his tendency to describe the position of the truly original poet as forced into a defensive position by a huge variety of information. Davie's hypothetical poet with only one pair of eyes to survey the museum assumes that a single point of perspective is the only natural response to a heightened awareness of different lyrical forms; yet the preoccupations with a shake-up of vision and point of perspective, like the poems preoccupied with pearls/eyes, argue that the natural response is to be surprised by more than one point of perspective. These contemporary museum poems are part of the dream state, using the imaginary museum as a test-chamber for the experimental reassembly of objects and technique into new pictures of Scotland. What is needed to discuss the vision of these modern Scottish museums is a way of describing their double vision as a strength because of its evaluative rigour; a way of asking 'what is going on here?', as Davie did, but in which this 'common sense' gaze is not necessarily set up antagonistically outside the perspectives or capabilities of literary criticism. If there is more than one language, and more than one kind of formal influence which can be identified in these poets' work; this multiplicity is increasingly reflected in critical

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24 'A Defence of Noetry', p.xviii.

approaches which accept more than one critical sightline, more than one basis of critical argument, but there is still room for criticism which can more readily include commercial as well as critical influences on literary value.

I propose that as an alternative to Davie's model of the museum as a symbol of crisis, it is more appropriate to read the marketplace influences and situation of Scottish contemporary poetry according to a model suggested by Walter Benjamin which is sympathetic to these poems and to the involvement of the reader. It is related to the idea of the flâneur and the idea of becoming immersed in environments by travelling through them. It is also perhaps more readily sympathetic to the idea of the reader, and to the material context of literary production which, as the museum poem shows, has become important for this generation of poets, yet is not entirely covered by the ideas of Informationism. In *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin started to describe a kind of literary vision that could understand the space of the literary museum, with its need for changing perspectives and above all its need to avoid any sense of poetry or the poet being immured in any one interpretation or function. In his essay on 'Unpacking My Library', Benjamin had described how books and the texts they contain could form a private museum which would enclose their reader in idiosyncratic recollection – much as Davie's metaphorical museum is constructed from the texts which form the poet's personal library, though with a far greater enthusiasm for the material aspect of books. Benjamin ended his essay by describing how even the most materialist of book collectors who experiences the heightened intimacy of reading ('ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects') ultimately withdraws into his museum, obscured by its formal constructions; 'I have erected one of his dwellings, with books as

building-stones, and now he is going to disappear inside'.[25] Yet like Davie's criticism of media, Benjamin also implies that textual materiality can be obscuring or obstructive. Simply displaying poetry as something which must be read within a publishing culture rather than within a textual canon, and subject to the classifications of bibliophiles rather than textual critics, doesn't necessarily help the poetry or the poet to be seen in a different way. It is an idea in *The Arcades Project*, however, which offers a way of integrating the materiality of text with the actions of the reader and with the perspective of poets who, like W. N. Herbert, base their writing on a kind of immersion in their environment. This material understanding of literary space is what Benjamin seems to refer to with the phrase 'the "colportage phenomenon of space"' (*Das »Kolportagephänomen des Raumes«*).[26] It provides a model which can combine ambiguity of perspective (which, as Davie's essay hints, the contemporary poem needs if it is going to negotiate with twentieth-century traditions of critical reading) with an understanding of the role of the poet in the production of contemporary poetry.

In contrast to the agoraphobia, or quite literal fear of the exchanges and comparative values which lurk in open spaces, which is evident in Richards's *Practical Criticism*, the colportage phenomenon of space relies on the idea of free movement and treats all space as a potential marketplace. *Colportage* is glossed by the English edition of *The Arcades Project* as:

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25 Walter Benjamin, 'Unpacking My Library: A Talk About Book Collecting', in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt and trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp.61-69 (p.69), (first publ. in *Literarische Welt*, 1931).

26 Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1982), V1: *Das Passagen-werk*, [M1a,3], p.527.

> system of distributing books by travelling peddlers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in France. From *col*, "neck," and *porter*, "to carry," reflecting the fact that colporteurs carried their wares on trays suspended from straps around their necks. They disseminated religious and devotional literature, manuals, almanacs, collections of folklore and popular tales, chivalric romances, political and philosophical works in inexpensive formats, and, after 1840, serial novels. In decline by the mid-nineteenth century, due to competition from the popular press.[27]

The colporteur was also an important figure of distribution in Scotland, where colportage flourished particularly towards the end of the nineteenth century in the distribution of religious material through rural areas and the canny grasping of new commercial pressures and forces for the distribution of printed material and its transient and therefore ignored readers, like the farm workers moving from bothy to bothy each season, or the men building the new railways.[28] It seems coincidental but fitting that this shifting combination of evangelism and publishing mechanism surfaces in Scottish literary economy as well as in Benjamin's perception of French literature's commodification.

However, Benjamin's concept also treats all public space as a kind of potential museum which inspires wide-ranging vision. He associates the transience of colportage with a type of multiple perspective which gives the spectator at least an illusion of

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27 *The Arcades Project*, p.1024.

28 See Kingsley G. Rendell, *Out and About with the Bible: The Story of Two Centuries of Colportage in Scotland* ([n.p.]: Scottish Evangelistic Council, [1992]), in particular on the relationship between colportage evangelism and an awareness of a growing mass audience for cheap printing techniques and distribution. The colporteurs themselves are relatively underdocumented even in French literary history and certainly in Scottish literary studies, partly because of the ephemeral nature of their materials and their constant movement from place to place, or because of their small numbers; in 1893, an unprecedented 170 colporteurs gathered in Edinburgh, but this seems to have been at the peak of the SCS's success.

surreally easy control over the objects they see displayed in shops, arcades, museums, studios or galleries, yet retaining a reminder that the physical nature of colportage is constantly surprised at this ease. The history of the term in France also ensures connections between the colporteur and the spreading of unrest and revolutionary spirit, where the Scottish booktrade would later dedicate the function to a religious evangelism. In either case, Benjamin's conception of colportage is most usefully seen as a catalyst; colportage introduces or initiates the possibility of one or several different realities into the supposed natural perception, which normally only concentrates on reading one layer of historical presence at a time. Yet in five references to colportage and 'the colportage phenomenon of space', Benjamin indicated that although colportage implied energy and movement, it certainly did not imply either religious morality or an evangelistic concern for discriminating reading; he seems to have used it deliberately because of its connections to the selling of books, and its distance from the judgement of an involved literary community because of its traditional association with popular fiction and tracts.[29] 'Never trust what writers say about their own writings', he noted of Zola, whose explanation of one of his own novels did not, Benjamin felt, account for 'the admixture of colportage, the bloodthirstiness, the cinematic goriness of the action'.[30] Benjamin's references to colportage, rather than the colportage phenomenon of space, refers to print publishing as a medium which is not exclusively literary; colportage itself is also in his

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29 The editor of the German edition of Benjamin's collected works provides a rough dating for the individual manuscript parts, based on two sets of copies made by Benjamin, one in 1935 and one in 1937, and within these periods the alphabetical system is mainly in a chronological order. The passages quoted here mainly come from 1935 ([H1,3], [I2,6], [M2,1], [M1a,3] and [S1a,5]) but [c°, 3] comes from early notes made in 1928/9, and [M6a,1] from before December 1937. (Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a.M.: 1982). V1-2: *Das Passagen-werk*, p. 1262).

30 *The Arcades Project*, [H1,3], p.204.

descriptions cheerfully unhermetic about strict differentiation between media, in its association with *cinematic* goriness. In *The Arcades Project,* references to colportage in a more academic environment describe something like Genette's paratext, unpredictable in its tendency to betray as well as package its central text: in an example of the 'principle of colportage illustration', Benjamin notes the example of an exhibition catalogue which implied that pictures of military events needed to be supplemented with extracts from written descriptions of the events, but even the extracts provided failed to explain the pictures completely.[31] In this context, 'colportage illustration' means the destruction of self-containing walls around a text, setting off never-ending references to other sources regardless of what those sources might be.

Comparing two of the colportage passages illustrates how the concept provides a useful model for reading the museum poem. In this first extract, the room or structure which is being examined proves disconcerting, showing that any idea of a normal chronological order or perspective is upset within its walls. The structure temporarily acquires the ability to communicate to its reader, in the way that, for example, W.N. Herbert's Dundonian streets and arcades relive their history under his gaze while their space prompted sounds or speech coming from an 'internal source'.[32]

> The "colportage phenomenon of space" is the flâneur's basic experience [...] Thanks to this phenomenon, everything potentially taking place in this one single room is perceived simultaneously. The space winks at the flâneur: What do you think may have gone on here? Of course, it has yet to be explained how this phenomenon is associated with

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31 *The Arcades Project*, [M2,1], p.419.

32 'Author's Note', *Dundee Doldrums: An Exorcism* (Edinburgh: Galliard, 1991), p.3.

colportage.[33]

This is a revision of Benjamin's earlier and longer note about 'the ambiguity of the arcades as the ambiguity of space', which dramatises in more detail the autonomy of what seem to be internal spaces imagined by the spectator.[34] The idea is a direct prefiguration of Donald Davie's more pessimistic suspicion that the wink is in fact an acknowledgement from the poet to the reader of the poem's limitations:

> The modern poet must always, as it were, peep round from behind his poem, to advise the reader – if by no more than a lifted eyebrow or a sidelong glance – that the poem is not to be trusted all the way, that there are modes of experience or ways of saying things which the poet is aware of though his poem on its own account is not'.[35]

Yet Benjamin suggests a vision of a structure or space which, though complicit with its creator, is independently knowledgeable in a way which has the capacity to surprise.

In the second of the comparable extracts, Benjamin records how in his observations or reading of a friend's room the element of 'colportage' makes for a literally hallucinatory sense of power over anything the space might be imagined to contain:

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33 *The Arcades Project,* [M1a,3], pp.418-9.

34 'The whispering of gazes fills the arcades. There is no thing here that does not, where one least expects it, open a fugitive eye, blinking it shut again; and should you look more closely, it is gone. To the whispering of these gazes, the space lends its echo: "Now, what," it blinks, "can possibly have come over me?" We stop short in some surprise. "What, indeed, can possibly have come over you?" Thus we gently bounce the question back to it. Here, the coronation of Charlemagne could have taken place, as well as the assassination of Henri IV, the death of <Edward's> sons in the Tower, and the ... That is why the wax museums are here. This optical gallery of princes is their acknowledged capital', <c°, 3>, *The Arcades Project*, p.878.

35 'The Poet in the Imaginary Museum', p.55.

> During my second experiment with hashish. Staircase in Charlotte Joël's studio. I said: "A structure habitable only by wax figures. I could do so much with it plastically [...] I can transform the Goethe house into the Covent Garden opera; can read from it the whole of world history. I see, in this space, why I collect colportage images. Can see everything in this room – the sons of Charles III and what you will."[36]

A structure – a museum, a room, a poetic form or perhaps an anthology – can be read from the perspective of the colportage phenomenon of space; the reader will have their original perspective challenged, regarding this not as destabilisation or betrayal of the authority of their reading, but as a useful jolting of their preconceptions. Just as William James described Pragmatism, it is a 'corridor theory' between different cultural influences, rather than a way of regarding structure as a limiting, threatening concentration of contradictory values; but just as James's Pragmatism might have been a profitable complement to Richards's techniques of reading in the 1920s, Benjamin's concept applied to contemporary readers need not invalidate the techniques of Practical Criticism today.[37]

In the final reference in *The Arcades Project* to colportage, it becomes the conduit for 'the theological element', reflecting moral conviction in the context of everyday life. Although this is the most obscure of all the references, it is clear in its reference to the defining characteristic of the colportage phenomenon of space itself: 'all events could have taken place in the same space'.[38] Despite Benjamin's obvious

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36 *The Arcades Project*, [I2a, 1], p.216.

37 William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1907), p.54.

38 *The Arcades Project*, [S1a, 5], p.547.

ambivalence towards the concept, indicated in the choice of colportage with its associations with the escapism of popular fiction and cheaply printed texts, the colportage phenomenon of space visualises a system of literary values which does not summarily exclude some kinds of literature. It also accepts that the traditional practices of textual criticism will always be wary of more materialist approaches, considering them unnatural in the way they multiply perspective as uncontrollably as they manufacture copies indistinguishable from the real thing (like Richards' fear that the commodification of literature forces the critic into carrying 'stocks of imitation currency, crisp and bright, which satisfy the [literary] highwaymen' rather than expressing a genuine opinion of a work).[39] Contemporary Scottish poems have been similarly responsive both to material readings, as in the influences of the climate of production on the poems, and geared towards the amazing persistence of the theory of Practical Criticism, which asserts its untheorised and 'natural' perspective; but this persistence of Practical Criticism, conserved within an approach which suggests that a double perspective is just as natural, is perhaps the best way for both approaches to maintain a healthy evaluation of each other.

In proposing ways of reading the material effects of technology on literary understanding, Baudrillard, as well as Benjamin, emphasises the unnatural properties of mechanical reproduction, as I discussed in Chapter 5. Yet while Benjamin's spatial metaphor might provide a sort of freedom, Baudrillard's appears not only repetitive but soulless in an apathetic or corrupt way ('torpor', 'sickness'). Although Benjamin's observations of the value of what seems unnatural were made in the 1920s and 1930s,

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39 I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1929), p.318.

they have more in common than Baudrillard's essay with the way that Scottish poets of the 1980s and 1990s have pathologised the value of the organic or natural ideal which appeared as a defining characteristic of Irish poetry in English. The colportage phenomenon of space is a form of perception which relies on its analogy with the real colporteurs; but it was only made possible (or more accurately, only popularly accessible as a metaphor of itself) by mechanically-aided breakthroughs in the new colportage of media that reproduce art, whether sound recording, waxwork modelling techniques, daguerreotypes, or cheaply-printed and distributed books. It expresses the ability to perceive, or to use, something in a more heightened manner than that which is deemed to be 'natural', to see the first impression again with more clarity, or to listen repeatedly to the same performance, and in this it is very close to Benjamin's definition of mechanical reproduction:

> First, process reproduction is more independent of the original than manual reproduction. For example, in photography, process reproduction can bring out those aspects of the original that are unattainable to the naked eye yet accessible to the lens, which is adjustable and chooses its angle at will. And photographic reproduction [...] can capture images which escape natural vision. Secondly, technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself. Above all, it enables the original to meet the beholder halfway, be it in the form of a photograph or a phonograph record. The cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art; the choral production, performed in an auditorium or in the open air, resounds in the drawing room.[40]

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40 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, pp.211-244 (pp.214-215). first publ. in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung, V(1)* (1936).

Confronted with its 'manual reproduction', which could usually be branded as a forgery, the original formerly preserved all its authority; not so, Benjamin felt, with the modern machineries of 'process reproduction', which add the quality of surreal visitation and virtual play with scale to their uncanny portrayal of the original in a suddenly public 'drawing room' (or Chartres Cathedral displaced to Gowrie). In this, Benjamin captures several decades before Donald Davie the disruption that new media cause in Practical Criticism's way of reading a poem, which holds that repeating the very first response over and over is a stunted reading; not a technical skill but the faked reproduction of an initial reading. Yet it is sympathetic, and perhaps more appropriate, to the reading of poetry such as Tracey Herd's, which examines the repetition of celluloid images or the repeated familiar formula of a commercially successful series of girls' stories. The idea of being able to repeat an action or a reading over and over again (like Marilyn Monroe made to 'do the same scene / fifty times') is central to her poetry, which is as much preoccupied with the potential of media as Herbert's 1994 definition of Informationism; all these poets are fascinated by the idea of technology which, as Benjamin describes, is 'capturing images which escape natural vision'.[41]

I would suggest that in their incredible appetite for all sorts of these new and unnatural phenomena not always associated with the poetic, as well as their exploitation of languages and their debates over selection and preservation, Scottish contemporary poets are often applying principles of anthologisation within individual poems, by using the joint metaphors of new technology and the museum poem to sift through a store, as Benjamin describes, of 'images which escape natural vision'. However, anthologies of

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41 Tracey Herd, 'Marilyn Climbs Out of the Pool', *No Hiding Place* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1996), p.33.

Scottish poetry towards the end of the twentieth century have themselves become increasingly likely to regard the variety of languages which influence Scottish writing as a strength rather than a weakness. The debate over the complexity of Scottish poetry's linguistic heritage has often seemed to hinge on whether Gaelic poems are included in the anthologies, rather than simply mentioned regretfully in the editorial prefaces; more recently, the debate has also been visible in the editorial discussions of difficulty. The idea of more than one language in the linguistic heritage of Scottish poetry has been associated in anthology prefaces with ideas of difficulty and confusion in expressing a strong national identity for Scotland, as in my first example here, from the 1950s.

Douglas Young's *Scottish Verse: 1851-1951* (1952), exemplified issues for the anthologist of Scottish poetry which were still evident in the anthologies of the 1970s and 1990s. Young described Scottish poetry as written in the three equally important languages of 'the official King's dialect of English', 'the most peculiarly Scottish linguistic medium' (although he offered an array of descriptions for the 'language, speech, dialect or amalgam' currently being reformed by 'the vortex of Hugh MacDiarmid'), and Gaelic. But he would only go so far as to say that this diversity of languages might not actively hinder a sense of Scottish identity:

> There is a certain interpenetration of the languages current in Scotland, and literary interanimation. Scots or Gaelic words and idioms and rhythms crop up even in the English of the most Anglicised. More fundamental, there is a common underlying national consciousness whose expression in superficially very diverse media may sometimes be sensed. One thinks of an old long-rooted stock imparting some autochthonous sap to various scions engrafted on it. The outward and visible signs of

> this inward and spiritual grace are not classifiable otherwise than by the term 'Scottish', which I use in its widest extension.[42]

His argument seems covert, compared fifty years later with the relish of Informationism for riotous linguistic variety in Scottish poetry: and his metaphor of 'an old long-rooted stock' works hard to suggest an overall unity in language which is natural and organic, in contrast with the ideals of this generation of Scottish poets, discussed in Chapter Four, who use language to investigate ideas which go against the grain. Young is particularly tentative when he draws parallels between literary and political visions of national independence, seeing fragility and division as much as political confidence in the variety of languages evident in Scottish poetry; although his introduction looks doubtfully ahead to an impending 'synthesis' in which 'our megalopolitan culture' might make 'some national interlingua', he also seems to regard the diversity of Scottish literary languages as symptomatic of a 'national psychosis', and he quotes Edwin Muir's description of the Scots as a people who cannot forget 'the broken image of the lost Kingdom'. The slightly clouded confidence Young identifies in phrases like 'something fermenting in Scotland', and 'a wide-spread groping to recover that lost Kingdom [...], to redintegrate the Community of Scotland' is tempered by his perception that in common with the poetry of 1851, Scottish poetry in 1951 was still 'wondering how to grow up further'.[43]

His caution over the multilingual influences in Scottish poetry, and how much they could be covered by the term 'Scottish', was still evident at the beginning of the

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42 Douglas Young, ed., *Scottish Verse 1851-1951* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1952), pp.xvii-xxx (pp.xvii-xviii).

43 Young, pp.xxix-xxx.

1970s in Tom Scott's *The Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*. Scott discusses the origin of Scottish poetry in 'cloudy Celtic beginnings', and included the influence of Latin dating from Columba's arrival in the sixth century. However, unlike Young, 'for obvious reasons' which he does not list he elected not to include poetry in Latin or Gaelic in the anthology. Almost as cautious as Young, he seems content to suggest that the more varied the language of Scottish poetry, then the more the word 'Scottish' is the only, rather nebulous, way to describe it; with the omission of Latin and Gaelic poetry, the anthology would represent, he noted, 'only one part, and not necessarily the best part, of the poetry which may fairly be claimed as Scottish in the widest sense'.[44] Nonetheless, in *The Penguin Book of Scottish Verse* and in *The Oxford Book of Scottish Verse* (1966), Scott omitted Gaelic and Latin; in the latter, even though '[a] truly comprehensive selection of Scottish verse would have to include a large proportion of Gaelic and Latin verse', he and his co-editor John MacQueen had decided that 'this was beyond the scope of the book'.[45] Linguistic variety seems to be equated with a poetry which can be termed Scottish, but in such a way that it sounds like an unsatisfactory compromise.

Interestingly, this sense that Gaelic and other languages might create difficulty in reading individual poems and, perhaps, complicate a reader's sense of the national identity, survives in two later anthologies destined for a readership outside Britain. The editors suggest that it is partly a question of space that Gaelic (as well as Irish and Welsh) are excluded from Keith Tuma's recent *Anthology of Twentieth-Century British*

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44 Tom Scott, ed., *The Penguin Book of Scottish Verse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp.[27]-56 (pp.28-29).

45 John MacQueen and Tom Scott, eds. *The Oxford Book of Scottish Verse* (Oxford: OUP, 1966), p.ix.

and Irish Poetry (2001), and Gaelic and Latin are excluded from David McCordick's *Scottish Literature: An Anthology* (1996–2002). 'Space is scarce', McCordick explains in a note at the beginning of the first volume, although in three volumes designed to make 'the Scottish achievement in literature accessible to the general reader', it is perhaps hard to see why Gaelic is given no place at all.[46] But more conclusive are the editorial suggestions that the idea of the 'general reader' influences the design of the anthology; in the case of the likely US readership, Tuma asserts that 'these languages [Gaelic, Irish and Welsh] are simply not read in the United States, however influential they have been for particular British and Irish writers'.[47] McCordick similarly says that 'the influence of these authors [Latin and Gaelic] on the English-American tradition has been small'.[48] What is understood as difficult, or too difficult, for the intended readership may also still be considered undesirable. It seems possible that, for anthologists like McCordick, Scott and Young, and perhaps Tuma, the idea of a country seeking to represent itself as a unified political state through not one language but three or more, is too difficult to present to readers who are unfamiliar with the country in question and are considered to need a kind of poetry which is more homogenous and readily identifiable. It therefore also seems possible that it is consideration of the likely readership, and perhaps the costs of permissions and translations, which have influenced these anthologists' choices.

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46 David McCordick, 'The Plan of This Book' in unpaginated preliminary pages of *Scottish Literature: An Anthology*, ed. by David MacCordick, 3 vols (New York: Peter Lang, 1996–2002), I (1996).

47 Keith Tuma, ed., *Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry* (Oxford/New York: OUP, 2001), p.xxiv.

48 McCordick, 'The Plan of This Book'.

In 1976, as a comparative example, Maurice Lindsay was firmly confident both that the 'middle half of the twentieth century' had truly been an outstanding era for Scottish poetry, and that its literary achievement was firmly connected to a political vision in which it was the conviction 'among several successive generations of Scots that their country should have more say in the running of her practical affairs'.[49] However, the introduction to Douglas Dunn's *The Faber Book of Twentieth-Century Scottish Poetry* (1992) almost dispenses entirely with lengthy apologies for the linguistic influences on Scottish poetry; notably, he argues that by 1992 Scottish poetry was not in need of apologists at all, since it was no longer 'a special case' which 'suffered from its own introverted publicity'.[50] Dunn proposed that a multiplicity of literary influences (if not literally multiple languages) simply helped to diffuse nationalistic tension in twentieth century Scottish poetry, rather than intensify worried analyses of national schism: 'it is the eclectic reading and wider range of influences to which younger [Scottish] writers have exposed themselves', he suggested, which 'explains the unclenched nationalism, or refusal of any kind of nationalism on a poem's surface'.[51] The title of his introduction is 'Language and Liberty'; after the defences of earlier anthologies the reader might assume that liberty is to be reached through a recognisably Scottish language but, in fact, Dunn's argument is that an insistence on a Scots language poetry constitutes a totalitarian literary state in which 'a Scottish poet writing in English could be bullied into believing that his or her language was not a native tongue'. His main

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49 Maurice Lindsay, ed., *Modern Scottish Poetry: An Anthology of the Scottish Renaissance 1925-1975*, 3rd edn (Manchester: Carcanet, 1975), pp. 17-20 (p.18).

50 Douglas Dunn, ed., *The Faber Book of Twentieth-Century Scottish Poetry* (London: Faber, 1992), pp.xvii-xlvi (p.xlv).

51 Dunn, p.xlv.

point was that the sort of literary confidence which is longed for in Young's anthology has been achieved at the end of the twentieth century, but achieved in the variety and not the uniformity of the languages of Scottish poetry; he concludes that '[h]ectoring issues' for the Scottish poet choosing which language to write in have been resolved, and 'the liberty of the three languages' (Scots, English and Gaelic) accepted. The 'liberty' of his title is the poet's freedom to write in the language he or she chooses, which complicates the parallels drawn in the earlier anthologies between linguistic liberty to write recognisably Scottish poetry and the political liberty of Scottish national independence.[52]

Anthologies of Scottish poetry in the 1990s have still felt it necessary to remind the reader that Scots, Gaelic and English must all be considered as part of Scottish literature, as must possible parallels between literature and politics. The introduction to Roderick Watson's *The Poetry of Scotland: Gaelic, Scots and English 1380-1980* (1995) again drew parallels between the state of the nation and its compensatory literary activity; as the title of the anthology shows, the selection of poems reiterated the equal importance of Gaelic, Scots and English (reversing the order of how accessible many readers might find these languages in the original) and Roderick Watson points out that the anthology was intended as a broad picture of Scottish literary history. However, he insisted that '[b]y now it should be clear that the "Scottish poetic tradition" is a much more complex, interactive, rich, many-stranded and fulfilling thing than any simple opposition between "Highland" and "Lowland"; "fantasy" and "realism"; "English", "Scots" or "Gaelic" can sustain'; his use of the word 'complex' echoed an insistence on the rich variety within Scottish literature which had become familiar to many readers.

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52 Dunn, p.xlvi.

It becomes clear in looking at the major anthologies of Scottish poetry published in the 1990s that difficulty, and not only linguistic difficulty, is welcomed rather than swept under the carpets of the editors' introductions.

Roderick Watson's emphasis on 'complex' is redolent of the word's position in the first edition of Daniel O'Rourke's *Dream State* anthology (1994). In fact, although these later twentieth-century anthologies of Scottish poetry all agree that there are many languages which make up Scottish literature, it is the changing perception of complexity which provides a kind of answer to the more tentative 'groping' towards the future described by Douglas Young in 1952. The first edition of the *Dream State* anthology again states a sense that the languages of Scottish poetry are established as Scots, Gaelic and English. Daniel O'Rourke's introduction also asserts the continuing relevance for his generation of the connection between Scottish literary and political expression. He recognises that the word 'Scottish' is essential to his editorial principles which, as he argues in the preface to the recently-published second edition, value inclusivity even at the cost of internal contradiction ('I'm an innkeeper rather than a gatekeeper'); for O'Rourke, contemporary Scottish poetry in 1994 was 'characterised' by this 'vigorous pluralism' and more particularly by a necessary acceptance of disagreement and difficulty.[53] In fact, rather than seeing the boundaries of Scottish poetry as a troubling series of contradictions which can be smoothed over by philological justification, O'Rourke is happiest in his role as anthologist when identifying complication as part of the Scottish psyche. 'A forthright, fervent but questioning and complexly modern Scottishness' contributes to the 'highly successful, complexly Scottish poets' like John

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53 Donny [Daniel] O'Rourke, ed., *Dream State: The New Scottish Poets*, 2nd edn (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2002), pp.[1]-5 (p.2).

Burnside and Carol Ann Duffy, and Robert Crawford's poems which examine 'how complex a collective inferiority complex can be' make a point about 'the complexity of modern communications' and stand in a complicated relation to 'a country as small and complex' as Scotland. When O'Rourke finally summarised 'Scottishness, in poetry, as in everything else' as 'a hard quality to pin down', he seems not to be wriggling out of specifics, but insisting on complexity and pluralism as positive description. In the Scottish poetry anthology of the 1990s, complexity becomes in many ways the easiest way of describing what is was that makes twentieth-century Scottish poetry Scottish; if there is not the singly identifiable language that Douglas Young suggested in rather futuristic fashion ('some national interlingua'), there is instead a peculiar simplicity about describing 'Scottish' poetry as either uncontrollably polyglot or defined by its complexity. Edwin Morgan had already summarised this thirst of Scottish poets for a confident exploitation of a difficult and varied linguistic heritage when he reviewed Douglas Dunn's Faber anthology in 1992, and credited what would be the *Dream State* generation of poets for the 'late-flowering' of the delight in verbal multiplicity revived by poets like Robert Garioch and Sydney Goodsir Smith:

> Because Scotland has strong feelings of nationalism without a political correlative, it has often been tempting to feel envious of one-nation-one-language scenarios, but, in fact, the messy linguistics of Scotland (English, Gaelic, rural and urban Scots) has been convincingly shown in recent years to have a stimulating rather than a deadening effect on Scottish writing.[54]

This simplicity has its critics, as for example Alan Bold's hostile review of the first

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54 Edwin Morgan, 'Speaking in Tongues', *Sunday Times*, 19 July 1992, section 14, p.6.

edition of *Dream State*, when he argued that contentment with defining Scottishness as the undefinable 'is the problem for many of the poets here, for, not a genius in sight, they offer easy answers not profound solutions'.[55]

As the introduction to Robert Crawford and Mick Imlah's *New Penguin Book of Verse* put it, the Scottish poets who chose in the later twentieth century to write in English were therefore easily identified by the difficulty the reader might have in explaining the quality of their poetry that is 'Scottish':

> this verse in English none the less declared itself, whether by setting or by some subtler trace of accent – variants of what Stevenson called the 'strong Scots accent of the mind' – to be wholly and contentedly Scottish.[56]

The contemporary Scottish poem is identified in these last two anthologies not by consistent linguistic features, but by how contented it is to reveal complexity. To put the trends of the anthologies in a less passive construction, I would suggest that actually these anthologists have become increasingly confident, less of the literary and poetic languages and their political relevance which the anthologies have acknowledged for some time, than that their readership is content to accept that the definition of Scottish poetry is that it is too various to be defined. As Alan Bold's criticisms suggest, this definition may not be satisfactory in all readers' understanding of Scottish literary development, but what is of interest is that these anthologies' editors, many poets themselves, have perceived an increasing acceptance in readers of the wide range of

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55 Alan Bold, 'Morgan Transplants'. *Sunday Times*. 13 February 1994, p.6.

56 Robert Crawford and Mick Imlah. eds. *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse* (London: Penguin, 2000), pp.xvii-xxix (p.xxvi).

linguistic resources and kinds of language being used in Scottish poetry. In this sense, each of these anthologies may be seen as responding to the readership and marketplace of their time, as much as they are setting their own agenda for Scottish poetry.

Like the extended poems I discussed in Chapter 4, which I suggested could be read in part as responding to the expectations of them as specifically Scottish poems, the anthology of Scottish poetry can therefore also be seen as engaging with the expectations of its readership. A rather negative interpretation of this, however, might be that any anthology is guided by the demands of the marketplace, attempting to sell off literary knowledge in such a way that the selection will influence all its readers to produce the same or similar interpretations; there has been doubt, particularly in North America, that the anthology will become not a machine to think with as Richards described books in *Principles of Literary Criticism*, but a means to mechanical thought in its readers. Leah Price commented in a substantial review of seven anthologies (four of them of English-language poetry) on the perceived drawbacks of the large anthologies frequently used in (North American) universities because they are relatively cheap for students to buy, and the assumption that their selections will have an ineradicable influence on student readers; 'a captive audience makes for high stakes – both cultural and commercial.'[57]

Price's review also emphasised that it is impossible for anthologies to reproduce all texts; the electronic database is now far more able to provide something like the comprehensive virtual library of anthologists' dreams, if the anthology's aim is to include everything and not be seen to have criteria of exclusion. As Roderick Watson

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57 Leah Price, 'Elegant Extracts'. *London Review of Books*, 3 February 2000, p.26.

commented in the introduction to his anthology, *The Poetry of Scotland: Gaelic, Scots and English* (1995):

> The only agenda-free anthology of Scottish poetry would be a project worthy of Borges's notion of the universal library, for it would contain every poem ever written in Scotland, or by a Scot.[58]

The huge paper or online anthology, relatively cheap and accessible, is a contemporary version for the reader of Benjamin's colportage phenomenon of space. What could be seen more cynically as purely repackaging poems for new audiences might also allow those new readers to feel a kind of intimacy with the texts which they can relatively easily own in the form of an anthology. Yet even in anthologies which have a large space and budget at their disposal, the editors will still arrive at some form of practical restrictions on how many poems they can include. The impulse to make a large anthology represent the work of as many poets as possible can mean that each poet only has a few poems included, possibly displayed without any of the context of literary or biographical constraints or inspirations that formed it. The poem ends up as an artefact out of context, vulnerable to attack or open to reinterpretation according to the mercies of anthologists and reviewers. This is a prospect which does not always seem to alarm poets; apart from the anthologies designed to provide cheap teaching resources, one of the reasons anthologies are made is in order to display poems in a different light from their usual context. John Burnside, Robert Crawford, W. N. Herbert, Kathleen Jamie, Don Paterson, Robin Robertson – many of the poets discussed in this thesis have been

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58 Roderick Watson, ed., *The Poetry of Scotland: Gaelic, Scots and English* (Edinburgh: EUP, 1995), pp.xxxi-xxxvii (p.xxxi).

involved in editorial processes, whether as anthologists, publishers or editors. This suggests that these poets do not fear making the kinds of decisions involved in anthologising nor, perhaps, find it is dissociated from the influences and principles they acknowledge as poets. As I suggested in Chapter 4, the collage-like structure and the content of Robin Robertson's longer poem, 'Camera Obscura', may in fact be influenced by his own work as an editor.

Leah Price, unlike Donald Davie, finds this a positive aspect of anthologising, arguing that the anthology editor could be said to rewrite poems through the new juxtapositions of the anthology's selection:

> the sheer miscellaneity [of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*] also encourages a kind of exploration that unabridged paperbacks would never allow, even if students could find and afford them [...] Suggestive and rarely predictable, these cross-cuttings place even the most familiar texts in a new light.[59]

Out of the restrictions of producing teaching texts, and of producing affordable texts, anthologies can both become teaching tools and approach the status of a creative medium in their own right. As one satisfied anthology reviewer wrote of Matthew Sweeney and Jo Shapcott's *Emergency Kit* (1996), it is possible that the anthology 'interweaves subjects, accumulates nuance and reveals subtle affinities between writers [...] its deep structure allows it to be read as one long polyphonic poem.'[60]

The apparently polemical rather than the representative anthology can perhaps

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59 Price, p.26.

60 Kevan Johnson, 'Anyone But Oneself', *TLS*, Friday 14 March 1997, p.23.

contribute to this sense of polyphony, as much as the more inclusive, large anthology; for example, the series of Pocketbook anthologies edited by Alec Finlay combine vastly different sorts of writing (prose as well as poetry), and also include even more different kinds of artistic voice in the form of visual art and sound recordings. Finlay is involved in the idea of the artist's book as a creator/collaborator and as curator, and suggests in his editorial choices that the anthologist is as just as much an artist when he makes a book; as he acknowledges in the introduction to the Pocketbook anthology of haiku the influence of his father, Ian Hamilton Finlay, is literally tangible in his own imaginary and more literal museum of artistic resources. The Pocketbooks series, beautifully designed and attractive as book objects, are physical examples of how thinking small rather than encyclopaedic can create an atmosphere of possibility, particularly when it is done with an awareness of how various media can contribute to printed text. *Wish I Was Here* (Pocketbooks 5) is an example of poet/anthologist roles conflating, since it is edited by the Gaelic poet Kevin MacNeil with Alec Finlay and combines elements of artist's book (illustrated with sometimes enigmatic rather than literal portraits of the poets) and of sound recording – a CD of some of the poets talking 'embedded in the acoustic environment they inhabit' which 'aims to create a sense of place'.[61] In fact, most of the anthologies in the series are concerned with suggesting a variety of senses of place for Scottish poetry, and are characterised by a driving sense that the anthology has a wealth of new possibilities if all aspects of its possible media are explored; what Genette terms the peritext of these anthologies, the material that accompanies the text, has little in relation to Genette's vision of an unpredictable but subordinate 'threshold' and has a lot

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61 Kevin MacNeil, ed., *Wish I Was Here*, Pocketbooks 5 (Edinburgh: Pocketbooks, Morning Star Publications, Polygon, 2000), p.208.

to do with the anthology as personal virtual museum. *Love for Love*, another interesting anthology from the series, consists of each contributor having chosen one of their own poems and one poem by another poet so that it is effectively an anthology created equally by its contributors and its editors (Alec Finlay, and John Burnside to whom the editorial concept is attributed in the copyright note); one contributor combines the idea of choosing a love poem with the persistent love of the poems in his imaginary museum when he justifies his choice – 'I first knew this poem from *Seventeen Poems for Sixpence* (1943) and certain phrases became part of the permanent anthology I carry about in my head'.[62] The anthology's resulting take on the fragmentary nature of anthologising is shown, like the polyvocal nature of many of its poems, as new strength, and even shows how the poems can speak for the editorial principles. It has a representative poem on the back cover rather than a blurb, and Edwin Morgan's 'The persistence of love' illustrates exactly the fragmentation and variousness in these small contemporary Scottish anthologies which complements the more comprehensive scope of the larger collections.

Anthologies of poetry in Britain and Ireland have continued to give the impression, at least, that they are learning from first principles how to build museums, particularly around the year 2000 which precipitated larger, more comprehensive (or more definitive) principles for anthologising. As well as the specifically Scottish anthologies which I mentioned earlier, the years leading up to the millennium produced Simon Armitage and Robert Crawford's *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since 1945* (1998), Sean O'Brien's *The Firebox: Poetry in Britain and Ireland after 1945* (1998), Michael Schmidt's *The Harvill Anthology of Twentieth-Century*

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62 Gael Turnbull, author note in *Love for Love: An Anthology of Love Poems*, Pocketbooks 3 (Edinburgh: Pocketbooks, Morning Star Publications, Polygon, 2000), p.194.

Poetry in English (1999), and with increasing emphasis on the millennial marketplace, Peter Forbes's *Scanning the Century: The Penguin Book of the Twentieth Century in Poetry* (1999) and Don Paterson and Jo Shapcott's *Last Words: New Poetry for the New Century* (1999). These last two only underline in their titles what was being suggested by all these large, end-of-the-century anthologies, which was the importance of the point in time in which the anthologists were making their choice of what poetry was most valuable; as critical writing as diverse as Richards's *Practical Criticism* and Steven Connor have suggested, the moment of critical judgement may define not only the value accorded to what is judged, but it can define the value of the judgement itself.

These anthologies will necessarily be succeeded by other ideas on what Scottish poetry is valuable and why, but that seems to be acknowledged by those who are often editors of anthologies and may also be poets, and are at home with these ideas of shifting and competing values. Daniel O'Rourke, whose second edition of the *Dream State* anthology has just been published by Polygon, described the first edition as being the kind of book he would want to buy on arriving in a new city; he wanted the second edition, while not retaining the original introduction, to keep a sense of 'the archaeological layers' that would make obvious its development.[63] Roderick Watson's argument in pre-devolution 1995 was that rather than attempt an impossibly comprehensive collection, anthologists should relish the necessary exclusions and evaluations, 'for they are what keep us and our culture live [...] what are anthologies for?':

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63 Phone interview with Daniel [Donny] O'Rourke, 6 November 2000.

> It seems to me that the clear agenda in almost all Scottish anthologies and literary histories has been to sustain, imply, construct or seek a version of ourselves through what we have written and what we have read over the years. After all, the main 'state' left to a 'stateless nation' may well be its state of mind, and in that territory it is literature which maps the land.[64]

The people Watson calls 'ourselves' include those poets and editors who are redefining their own roles through what 'we have written and read over the years', and what they have in a sense 'read' must include expectations of readers and the pressures of the marketplace.

There are a number of ways in which the modern marketplace approach to anthologies of the last ten years could be read as contributing to the change in the poet's role, and one is that poets are often considered the best for the job of anthologising both the poets and poetry of their own generation and for earlier writers. Major survey anthologies commissioned in the last ten years by publishers like Faber, Penguin, OUP, Harvill, Picador, Polygon, Bloodaxe, suggest that either it is only poets who regularly volunteer for the job, or that it is usually poets to whom these publishers choose to entrust the rather expensive, inevitably brickbatted and usually highly scrutinised task of compiling anthologies.[65] However, another marketplace pressure on the role of the poet

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64 Watson, p.xxxi.

65 For example, the large survey anthologies produced in the last two years before the millennium were frequently edited by poets; *Scottish Religious Poetry from the Sixth Century to the Present: An Anthology,* ed. by Meg Bateman, Robert Crawford and James McGonigal (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 2000); *New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*, ed. by Crawford, Imlah (London: Penguin, 2000); *Harvill Twentieth-Century Poetry in English*, ed. by Michael Schmidt (London: Harvill, 1999), *Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland*, ed. by Robert Crawford and Simon Armitage (London: Penguin, 1998); *The Firebox: Poetry in Britain and Ireland after 1945*, ed. by Sean O'Brien (London: Picador, 1998); and *Scanning the Century*, ed. by Peter Forbes (London: Viking, Poetry Society, 1999).

as editor is visible in the reviewing of several anthologies together, influenced by the review space available, which in effect argues that anthologies are all the same species, dictated by equal format, and must therefore be in competition.

Andrew Roberts has pointed out that 'anthologists usually register, in their introductions, some tension between the two alternatives: the claim to present work which is indicative of prevailing values and the impulse to create new standards of value, and thereby bring to public notice new elements, or new versions of literary history', and in his summary of anthologists' criteria of inclusion there are a number of criteria that thrive on an idea of competition rather than complement:

> novelty (the 'new' poetry), innovation (the technically new poetry), traditionalism (the organic line of value), representativeness (the poets of a social group, a geographical area, or a generation), oppositionality (the poetry of dissent), centrality (the 'mainstream'), marginality (in opposition to the mainstream), inclusiveness (range and variety), exclusiveness (*not* some particular style or aesthetic, usually presented as superseded).[66]

This competitiveness implies that each generation must have a style so innovative that it overturns previous styles or at least its immediate precursors – and of course, that implication has for some time been helping to confirm that the immediate precursors constituted a distinctive, homogenous style. This can lead to policies of exclusion on grounds of age or perceived generation, or inclusion in anthologies of previous generations. But one outcome of this perhaps overly-comparative treatment of

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66 Andrew Roberts, 'The Rhetoric of Value in Recent British Poetry Anthologies', in *Poetry, Value and Contemporary Culture*, ed. by Andrew Michael Roberts and Jonathan Allison (Edinburgh: EUP, 2002), pp.101-122 (p.102).

anthologies is that it devolves responsibility on the reader, turning anthologies' hint of ownership as intimacy into reader's requirement to search and select from amongst volumes, not poems; they need to own or to read more than one anthology. The comparison of anthology with anthology can be like comparing two related poems, although in critical comparisons (usually reviews) the competitive principle can make it a matter of seeing the differences only as so many careless omissions – 'when reviewing any anthology you must include a whingey bit', as W. N. Herbert put it.[67]

This perhaps makes it difficult to evaluate anthologies which are sympathetic towards the surprises generated by the kind of poems I have been discussing. The 'whingey bit' usually consists of registering surprise that a poem or poet has not been included as might have been predicted. But the poems which are particularly concerned with the display of literary and other artefacts are often successfully based on the assumption that predictability is a form of insult to the context of the poetry – the poem, and the state of the nation it describes, derive strength from exploiting new resources like modern technology, or reworking the middens that yield older artefacts. Kathleen Jamie's 'Mr and Mrs Scotland Are Dead' uses the museum poem to comment on both a changing sort of life and, through its title and emphasis on working tools within the poem, on the display of literary artefacts like allegories of a nation.[68] The poem is included in Jo Shapcott and Matthew Sweeney's anthology, which points in its

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67 W. N. Herbert, 'Mining the Nation's Humorous Psyche: *Hoots! an anthology of Scottish humour*, ed. Susie Maguire and David Jackson Young', *Scotland on Sunday: Spectrum*, 10 August 1997, p.11.

68 'Mr and Mrs Scotland Are Dead' was first published in *The Queen of Sheba* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1994), and printed in a New Generation special issue with 'One of us' and 'Boy in a blanket' in *Poetry Review* 84:1 (1994), pp.14-16. It was subsequently anthologised in *Emergency Kit* (1996), *The Firebox* (1998) and *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since 1945* (1998).

introduction to the importance of scientific discovery as an internal source of invigoration for poetry:

> We live in an age when scientists can see inside every cell in the body [...] it occurs to us that, just as Donne and Marvell were compelled by the discoveries of their time, so the poets in this book are responding to or reflecting the surprises of ours.[69]

The museum poem, and the virtual museum of the anthology, have a vested interest in maintaining a sense that new media and machinery is unpredictable, and belongs to a different discipline. These poems and anthologies demonstrate a form of knowledge, like a modern reworking of the *Chapman* definition of the long, national, poem; they are involved in an aesthetic which involves playing, more or less seriously, with the formal patternings which, like the design of a museum, can interpret and define the objects they display. They are linked to academia and to different sorts of information technology, not least because the poets who are usually given the task of anthologising are often involved in academia, with posts as academics or creative writers. The colportage phenomenon of space in this context becomes more than abstract theory; the double sense of surreal ease and surprise that identify the poetry can only be maintained by acknowledging that the job description of the poet is multiple but rarely carved in letters of stone. This thesis's study of the making, reading, and marketing of contemporary Scottish poetry suggests that the poet, to complete his or her work, has to become the communicative, educative colporteur; evangelising, propagating the historical items along with the historical styles, whether through actual anthologies or

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69 Jo Shapcott and Matthew Sweeney, eds, Introduction, *Emergency Kit: Poems for Strange Times* (London: Faber, 1996), pp.xv-xviii (p.xvii).

through the anthologising, museum poem. The material which is contained in anthologies of Scottish poetry is from a venerable historical tradition. The idea of the Scottish anthology, or museum, of poetry is not new. But the task of compiling an anthology for, if not always of, the contemporary is always a new job which has to be learned; reusing the same anthologising voice, like the same poetic voice, will not do.

In fact, the process of producing the Scottish anthology is one of perpetually learning the craft of anthologising in public, just as poets tend to learn in public (though anthologists are perhaps corrected in public more directly than poets). Eighty years ago, in the foreword to an anthology produced by Scottish universities in 1923, Neil Munro identified the embryonic anthologist, learning on the job within the microcosm of university magazines, as inevitably torn by the divisions between literary dreaming and the blinkered vision of salaried work, between romance and dullness. He could be describing not only the apprentice anthologist, but the poets who, like T. S. Eliot in his bank, are not principally identifiable by their ability to say that poetry is 'my job':

> However it may be in a blander English climate, only the more robust editors of Scottish university magazines come scatheless in physique and reputation through their years of office. Most of them, embittered by human ingratitude, disillusioned regarding the romance of letters, break down mid-way in the editorial career, resume their interrupted interest in text books, lectures, and exams.; astonish everybody by passing hurriedly, and go out to swell the dull but strictly disciplined and decorous ranks of professional men and statesmen.[70]

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70 Neil Munro, 'Introduction', *Scottish University Verses 1918-1923,* with a prologue by Professor J. S. Phillimore ([n.p.]: The Conference of the Scottish Universities Students' Representative Councils, 1923), pp.[vii]-x (p.viii).

If anyone asks what these anonymous people are doing there under the pavement in their dayjobs, the answer still seems to be that they are 'sorting out a highly tangled story', bringing the subjectivity of anthologising to account. The job description of the poet has extended to include the function of anthologist; if the reader is becoming aligned by academia with, perhaps even formally trained as, the poet, then the reader's job description and the literary values implicit in the way that we train readers should be changing too.

In this thesis I have tried to show the importance of different sorts of value in contemporary Scottish poetry; the values instilled in readers, the formal and social values expressed in poems and by poets, the kind of marketplace values which affect the way that poems are presented or recontextualised, the way that poets can afford to work and the ways in which the values of criticism and commercialism may sometimes coincide. The reader's job description might be summarised as a willingness to be aware of these often conflicting values, perhaps in contrast to the ways in which they were first taught to read poetry. The job of this generation of contemporary Scottish poets, defined through their poems and comments, has been to make an art out of the spectrum of values which has been their inheritance as both poets and readers.

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